

FROM THE BBC RADIO 4 SERIAL

EARTH SEARCH

A SCIENCE FICTION FANTASY
ACROSS SPACE AND TIME



JAMES FOLLETT

THE EARTHSEARCH SAGA

James Follett

Introduction

This book is based on a British radio serial broadcast in the 1980s.

Challenger is one of three starships designed to search for a planet suitable for Earth's excess population. It is controlled by humans with the help of two computers, Angel One and Angel Two.

By the time of the second-generation crew, the computers have come to believe that the mission will never succeed, and that they are far better equipped mentally to handle the *Challenger*. But they need humans to pilot the starship. The Angels reason that this can be done by destroying all the adults and conditioning the children to obey them without question...

When the BBC commissioned me to write 10 thirty-minute episodes of *Earthsearch* the contract specified that the duration of each episode should be 28 minutes, no more and no less. It was a length of time for a serial slot that had been set in stone back in the days of *2LO calling* being received on crystal sets.

The success of *Earthsearch* resulted in BBC Publications commissioning a novel based on the series. This volume is the result, and was the first time I'd turned scripts into a novel. I soon realised that the length constraints of radio no longer applied, thus the ten stories of *Earthsearch* in this book have a natural length: some are short and some are longer. Such are the joys of writing novels. Two more *Earthsearch* novels will follow this edition. They are *Earthsearch 2: Deathship* and the third book: *Mindwarp*.

Foreword to the First Edition

She was wearing a very diaphanous and very Grecian swirling robe, and not much else underneath. She glided nymph-like across the hotel ballroom towards me, a bewitching, enigmatic smile illuminating her lovely face. She was holding a book with a familiar-looking jacket.

“Mr Follett?”

Uncomfortably aware of my wife’s disapproval, I goggled at the gossamer goddess and agreed that she had the right person. I could hardly do otherwise: I was one of the guests of honour at the *Galacticon* Convention in which hundreds of Trekkers, Seveners (*Blake’s 7* devotees) and Earthsearchers were gathering for a four-day marathon bonanza of exotic fancy dress shows, watching endless episodes of *Doctor Who*, and trading science-fiction memorabilia. Somehow my vision had got hold of an advance copy of the second *Earthsearch* book even though publication was still a month off. She wanted me to sign it.

“You’ve no idea the trouble I’ve had getting that book,” she informed me. “And will you please sign it “for Sharna” — that’s my persona for this convention.”

Somehow, I never thought of Sharna, one of my central characters in *Earthsearch*, as looking like this young lady but I wasn’t prepared to argue. The next day, during a book-signing session that seemed unending, I became convinced that I was signing the entire print-run of both *Earthsearch* books; the Earthsearchers had collared the lot. A month later I suffered the embarrassment of having a book published, amid heavy promotion by the BBC, that was virtually unobtainable in bookshops. Then the protesting letters started arriving from readers (except that they weren’t reading) wondering what had happened to the *Earthsearch* books. I replied to them all, counselling patience, saying that BBC Publications would be reprinting. For reasons best known to themselves, the BBC did not reprint. Worse was to follow. There was a hardback edition of first *Earthsearch* which meant that it went into lending libraries, but there was no hardback edition of the second book. Another batch of indignant letters. By now my postage bill was swallowing the royalties on the books. Another disaster engineered by the BBC, with their uncanny ability to alienate a loyal audience, was to drop an episode of *Earthsearch* to make room for their coverage of the Pope’s visit to Britain. The howls of protest about the “lost” episode filled a readers’ letters column of the *Radio Times*.

The final chapter in this long catalogue of cock-ups was the non-appearance of the “Saga” edition. It had always been my intention that both books should be in one cover. Even today, a decade after the first episode of *Earthsearch* was broadcast, I still get letters asking when the promised “Saga” edition will be appearing. Well here it is—the definitive edition at last: the two books together for the first time complete with some restored passages that did not appear in the original editions. I’ve resisted the temptation to correct the continuity howler in Book Two; it’s so much a part of *Earthsearch* folklore that somehow the story wouldn’t be the same without it. Newcomers to *Earthsearch* will no doubt spot it and write to me; I enjoy receiving and replying to readers’ letters and see no point in capping this particular well.

As for the TV series, options have been sold but the production seems to be lost in a timewarp somewhere between Alpha Centauri and Los Angeles.

One final point: I’m often asked if there’s going to be a third *Earthsearch*. The answer has to be “no”. I spent two-years on the project: other stories clamouring to be told had to take a backseat. Nevertheless I thoroughly enjoyed every minute of that two-years.

Now it’s your turn.

James Follett

Godalming, Surrey

April 1991

Foreword to the Kindle edition

She was wearing a diaphanous, very Grecian, swirling robe, and not much else underneath. She glided nymph-like across the hotel towards me, a bewitching, enigmatic smile illuminating her lovely face. She was clutching a paperback with a familiar-looking jacket.

‘Mr Follett?’

Uncomfortably aware of Ed Bishop gaping in amazement at this mirage, I agreed that she had the right person. I could hardly do otherwise: Along with Ed, I was one of the guests of honour at the *Galacticon* Convention in which dozens of Trekkers, Seveners (*Blake's 7* devotees) and *Earthsearchers* were gathering for a four-day bonanza of exotic fancy dress shows, watching endless episodes of *Doctor Who*, and trading science-fiction memorabilia. Somehow my vision had gotten hold of an advance copy of *Earthsearch II: Deathship*, the second Earthsearch book, even though publication was still some time off. She wanted me to sign it.

‘You’ve no idea the trouble I’ve had getting that book,’ she said. ‘And will you please sign it "for Sharna" -- that’s my persona for this convention.’

Somehow, I never thought of Sharna, one of my central characters in the BBC series, as looking anything like this fabulous young lady but who was I to argue?

The Fancy Dress Ball in the evening, at which Ed and I were judges, posed a problem because all the girls were lovely and many of them had gone to much trouble over their stunning costumes. Ed’s solution to our dilemma was simple: to give the first prize to the girl who wore the most daring costume. That meant giving the prize to the lass who had done the least amount of work because her coszy consisted of only three essential sequined stars – and of those stars, those on her head kept dropping off.

I eyed the long rows of exotic girls in exotic costumes and said to Ed that were we to follow his idea, we’d never get out of the ballroom alive.

He agreed I had a point, so we gave the first prize to a beautifully attired Queen Nefertiti. A consolation prize went to a leggy character from the *Rocky Horror* show.

THE EARTHSEARCH SAGA

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Book One

EARTHSEARCH

Prologue: In the beginning...

EIGHTEEN THOUSAND MILLION years had passed since the spawning of the giant meteoroid during the cataclysmic event that had marked the foundation of the Universe and the beginning of Time.

It had been an uneventful period for the meteoroid; eighteen thousand million years spent moving in a straight line which, were it not for the ten-mile length of the starship Challenger lying in its path, would be a mere prelude to the total of its eventual lifetime.

The Challenger was the result of seven years' feverish activity in Earth orbit to construct the first of three ships to journey to the stars to search for an Earth-type planet which would one day become the new home of mankind. It had been conceived and built during a period of unprecedented, world-wide stability and peace when, for the first time in its history, men and women had the confidence to embark on such long-term projects which would not come to fruition within one lifetime.

The accumulated knowledge of three-hundred years' high technology had gone into the Challenger's design and construction. She had been fitted with the most advanced planetary surveillance equipment and instrument probes, and had the resources in her vast terra-forming centre to re-engineer potential Earth-type planets by means of robot machines and androids which the Challenger would leave behind.

Maintenance of such a vast ship would be beyond the resources of the starship's crew, so a workforce army of specialist androids had been designed and built in record time. These machines carried out the countless routine tasks necessary for the smooth running of the ship. They were under the command of the Challenger's two control computers who were responsible to the commander and crew for the ship's environment. These computers were known as Angel One and Angel Two and it was inevitable that by the time a second-generation crew had been born on the Challenger during its mission these two entities had become known as guardian angels.

What the designers of the guardian angels had not foreseen was that their creations would, as the years passed by on the Challenger, come to see themselves as more than mere computers. Were they not more intelligent than the men and women that occupied the mighty starship? Did they not have more power and ambition than the puny,

two-legged creatures that tried to dominate them? And was not the non-discovery of intelligent life in fifty years a clear indication that they could be the supreme beings of the galaxy? Or even the Universe?

The problem was that the guardian angels needed humans to man the main control room. For reasons best known to themselves, the Challenger's designers had decreed that only people could manoeuvre the starship, despite the fact that machines were infinitely more reliable. To the guardian angels, it was yet another folly in a dismal catalogue of incompetence. Humans fought among themselves and allowed their efficiency, such as it was, to be further reduced by their obsession with sex. To make matters worse, the second-generation crew were becoming disillusioned with the mission whereas the guardian angels wished for it to continue.

The guardian angels decided to rid the Challenger of its adult humans. The problem was how. Using the androids against the crew was sure to fail because most of them were only good at doing those tasks which they had been designed for. To be certain of success, all the adults would have to be destroyed simultaneously.

When the guardian angels detected the presence of the distant giant meteoroid and discovered that it was on a three hundred miles per hour converging course with the Challenger, they decided that fate was on their side. They calculated comparative velocities and angles, and concluded that a collision was inevitable provided the crew were not alerted.

When the meteoroid was one month away they were able to refine their calculations; they made the interesting discovery that the meteoroid would strike the Challenger a glancing blow in the region of the main assembly hall.

When it was three weeks away, they were able to compute the nature and extent of the damage that the collision would cause; the ship would be severely damaged but not crippled. What damage there was would be within the abilities of the service androids to repair.

The meteoroid drew nearer but the guardian angels remained silent. One week before the inevitable collision, they informed the crew that service androids would have to carry out urgently needed maintenance work on the outer hull. The meteoroid alarms were closed down and a hundred service androids swarmed out of the maintenance airlocks and spread themselves along the Challenger's ten-mile length. They X-rayed seams that did not require inspection; they filled minute, almost invisible particle scars that were too insignificant to warrant attention and they carried out thousands of

needless tests on systems that were in perfect working order.

One hour before the impending impact, a team of the more sophisticated androids dismantled the four outer turrets that housed the Challenger's meteoroid annihilation shields.

The guardian angels switched off the ship's optical telescopes thirty minutes before impact.

Fifteen minutes before impact and the ship was blind and helpless — defenceless against the million-ton mass of star matter hurtling towards it.

The Challenger's crew were unaware of the fate awaiting them as they filed into the auditorium to hear their commander's announcement.

* * * *

Commander Jonas Sinclair was a second-generation crewman. In common with the majority of the three hundred and twenty men and women sitting expectantly before him, he had been born on the Challenger. At least fifty of the older faces before him belonged to members of the first-generation crew — those who had watched the Challenger taking shape in Earth orbit over fifty years before.

Sinclair was nervous and ill at ease; he would have preferred to make his statement over the crew address system from his day cabin but the two guardian angels had suggested calling everyone together. Despite the protestations of the first-generation crew that the guardian angels were only computers, he had come to value their advice and guidance and even allowed them to decide when the meeting should be called.

Sinclair arranged his notes on the lectern and waited for his audience to settle down. He tapped his liquid-flo pencil gently on the polished surface. The pin microphone in his lapel picked up the soft clicks and amplified them in the air above everyone's heads. The buzz of conversation subsided.

"Fellow crew men and women," Sinclair began. "I have called you all together because we have reached an important stage in our mission. For fifty years we have toured the galaxy in search of other earths for colonization. When our parents set out on this survey voyage, it was hoped that one Earth-type planet would be discovered for every ten years shipboard time of the mission."

Sinclair glanced down at his notes and caught the eye of the four men and four women who were sitting in the front row watching him intently. He knew why they had sought out the front row and he gave them a fleeting smile of encouragement before raising his eyes to the

rest of the audience. “As we know, that has not happened, therefore we have continued the work of our parents.”

He sensed the fidgeting rather than saw it and immediately shortened his preamble by several paragraphs. “And now, during the past six months four babies of the third-generation crew have been born to us.”

The four couples in the front row seemed to lean forward in their seats, never taking their eyes off Sinclair.

“The parents of Telson, Sharna, Astra and Darv have petitioned me, saying that they do not wish their children to grow up as they have: not knowing about our home planet Earth. Never to breathe its air; never to feel its grass beneath their feet; never to walk under its blue skies and feel its warm summer breezes on their faces ... Ladies and gentlemen — I agree with them!”

There was a stunned silence. No one coughed or fidgeted: 320 pairs of eyes regarded him in amazement.

Sinclair pressed on: “Our parents denied us our home but does that give us the right to pass on that denial to a third-generation crew? I think not. Nor do I believe that it is possible for the Challenger to improve on the success of its mission.”

There was some sporadic clapping from the centre of the auditorium that Sinclair silenced with an upraised hand. “What I have to say now means that we will have to go into suspended animation because—”

As Sinclair expected, there was a loud chorus of protests. The mausoleum-like suspended animation chambers were mistrusted — a mistrust that the first-generation had passed on the second generation with the result that the suspended animation chambers were now rarely used. Also, despite the fact that the technique of reducing the body’s metabolism to the point where it was maintained at the point of death had been perfected over one hundred and fifty years previously, most people still considered that there was something sinister and unethical about going into a death sleep for periods ranging from a few days up to the maximum of fifty years.

Sinclair smiled and held up a hand to help the furore die away. “If you don’t like the idea of suspended animation,” he continued, “then the next phase is going to take ten years in real time. The Challenger is going home!”

The four couples broke the hush that followed Sinclair’s words; they jumped to their feet, clapping and cheering wildly. And then the storm broke as the entire audience rose to their feet applauding

enthusiastically and cheering. The thunderous acclaim dragged on for another minute. A woman in the front row jumped on to the rostrum and threw her arms around Sinclair's neck.

It was the last touch of a woman that Sinclair was to experience. At that moment the giant meteoroid struck the ship.

The cheers of the crew changed to screams of terror as the edge of the meteoroid sliced through the auditorium's domed roof and severed the fibre optic tracks that controlled the artificial gravity in that level of the ship. Weight vanished and the concept of "up" and "down" became meaningless. An invisible bubble of air which had been the auditorium's atmosphere erupted into space, sucking up everything that was not a fixture and hurling it into space through the gaping fissure. Some of the crew managed to delay their ejection from the ship by clinging desperately to their seats — their screams diminishing to thin, reedy cries as the air pressure plummeted to a vacuum. Free of the constraints of an atmosphere, their blood began frothing in their veins and arteries as boiling point dropped rapidly to the normal temperature of the human body. After five minutes, death released the grip of the few remaining in the auditorium and the dying air currents eddying into space through the ruptured dome wafted their bodies from the wounded ship.

Ten minutes later the guardian angels sent service androids — their eyes and ears now that so many of their audio and optical sensors had been destroyed — into the wrecked levels of the ship to survey the damage. Eight levels were beyond repair. Surgical androids, the most intelligent of all the robots, reported that there was no hope of the guardian angels regaining control over the central regions of the ship.

The guardian angels' initial concern at their miscalculation over the extent of the damage that the glancing collision would cause was assuaged when reports came in from the secondary-function androids: one food-production farm was still operational and so was the central water reservoir. The main control room in the prow of the ship was intact, and the photonic drive, ten miles from the control room in the stern of the ship, was in perfect working order. That the main control room escaped damage was particularly good news even though there were not, as yet, any crew left to man it.

Most important of all, two miles away from the devastation, four babies, watched over by nursery androids, were safe, and sound asleep. They hadn't even stirred during the moments of impact when shockwaves had raced the length of the Challenger.

Part One: Planetfall

Astra felt Darv's reassuring hands lessen their support against her chest and thighs. Before she could cry out, her head dipped under and water went up her nose and stung her eyes. She lashed out in panic, grabbing for Darv's shoulders, but his hands were back in place, lifting her to her feet. She stood spluttering and laughing, her long blonde hair plastered to her face and water streaming down her chest — its transparent skin drawn tightly over her ribs.

"Darv! You promised you wouldn't let go!"

"I promised to teach you to swim!" he retorted. "You'll never learn if I hold you all the time!"

Astra splashed water at Darv and immediately regretted it because he arched gracefully back and thrashed the water white with his feet right under her nose. She gave a shriek as he curved round, seized her under the armpits, and towed her backwards with his arms hooked across her chest. The shockwaves from the movement of his thin, powerful legs pulsed gentle caresses against her thighs and buttocks.

The shallow end of the reservoir brushed against Darv's back. He stood up in the water and lifted Astra to her feet. They waded to the edge of the reservoir and climbed the steep ramp set into the moulded plastic bank where they had left their clothes in an untidy heap.

Darv stretched out on his back to allow the clusters of powerful overhead solar lights to dry the water droplets clinging to his bronzed skin. Astra sat bedside him and drew her knees up to her chin.

It was noon on the Challenger — the shipboard time when the solar lights over the reservoir were at their fiercest. They created a warm mist that made it impossible to see across to the far side some three-hundred yards away. She spread her hair on her shoulders to help it dry quickly and watched the mist being sucked into the rain-generator ducts high above her head. It was a reassuring sight — knowing that the ship's systems were functioning normally. She wondered what it would really be like to sit beside an Earth lake with nothing above one's head except the sky. The holograms and videos of Earth in the library, that she watched avidly, showed huge billowing clouds. When the holograms were speeded up, the strange formations twisted and lunged across the heavens with unbelievable savagery. Astra was certain that she would be very scared of clouds.

She made a pillow of her one-piece suit as Darv had done and lay back. The intensity of the lights forced her to close her eyes while savouring the agreeable drying warmth on her skin.

“Darv?”

There was no answer. A few minutes later Astra was also asleep.

* * * *

Such was the force of the lightning flash that it broke through the planetary replication zone and forced Telson to take an involuntary step backwards, even though he knew that the simulated electrical discharge could not possibly hurt him. He stared for some seconds at the seething methane storm that gave the appearance of tearing the giant planet Alturn Five apart. The replicated scene was being relayed to the Challenger by an orbital instrument probe that had been launched from the ship a month earlier when it had passed within ten billion miles of the Alturn solar system. It had taken one month for the hologram signals from the probe to catch up with the departing Challenger.

Unlike his three colleagues, Telson was stocky and muscular. The others suspected that he was sensitive about his lack of height and were careful not to stand too close to him so that he didn't have to look up.

Sensing that Sharna had entered the galactic resources centre, Telson glanced round. She was hovering nearby. “We can forget turning back to the Alturn system,” he muttered sourly. “That's Alturn Five. Just look at it.”

Sharna moved nearer the replicator. She was tall and slender with short blonde hair that she pressed a surgical android into trimming once a month. Her considerable strength of character lay in her common sense and practical nature. She never lost her temper and hardly ever raised her voice except when breaking up the all too frequent disputes between Darv and Telson.

“What about the other planets?” she inquired.

Telson shrugged his broad shoulders. “Ask.”

“Angel Two,” said Sharna. “What is the potential of the other planets in the Alturn system?”

A warm, masculine voice answered: “There are six planets in the Alturn system, Sharna.” It was a voice that seemed to emanate from nowhere in particular. The two guardian angels' method of speaking to the crew was to activate several voice terminals in the vicinity of

those whom they wished to address. “All have an Earth potential of zero,” Angel Two’s voice continued. “A full analysis is now being assembled on visuals four to ten.”

Sharna and Telson switched their attention to the columns of data that were appearing on a bank of visual display screens to one side of the replicator. A hard copy breeder hissed to itself and ejected a printed version of the information on the screens. Sharna picked it up and sat in one of the fixed seats that formed a row in front of the planetary replicators. The galactic resources centre had been originally designed to accommodate up to twenty people. She spread the document on a working surface and ran her eye down the data fields.

“Nothing,” she said, looking up at Telson and regarding him steadily. “Not even a moon that could even be considered remotely habitable.”

Telson avoided her gaze. “There’s a planetary system three light-years from Alturn,” he began.

“Telson! You promised!”

“I said that I would consider it, Sharna.”

“Three light-years. That’s four years in suspended animation to get there that’ll take us another three light-years further from Earth.”

Telson’s expression hardened. He disliked opposition and he disliked having to counter it. It was a threat to his authority. Of the four survivors of the Great Meteoroid Strike twenty-five years previously, he was the oldest by three months, although that was not the reason why the two guardian angels had selected him to be the Challenger’s commander. He had none of Darv’s curiosity or sense of fun; none of Sharna’s quick-witted imagination; and none of Astra’s warmth. What he did have was an unpredictable temper which the other three had learned to respect, and an interest in preserving the status quo. The latter characteristic suited Angel One and Angel Two even more than the fact that Telson enjoyed being the Challenger’s commanding officer.

“We have a duty to the memory of the second-generation crew,” he reminded Sharna. It was an argument Telson was fond of raking up whenever the question of the Challenger’s return to Earth was discussed. “They gave their lives-“

“Rubbish,” Sharna snorted. “You may have forgotten the hologram recording of the last moments before the Great Meteoroid Strike, but I haven’t. They wanted to return home — everyone of them.”

Telson remained silent for a moment. The planetary replicator closed itself down automatically — dissolving the three-dimensional image of

Altun Five. "I will consult Angels One and Two," he said at length, moving to the doorway.

"What about Darv and Astra?" Sharna demanded.

"What about them?"

"Don't you think they should be consulted too?"

"No."

With that Telson crossed the centre's threshold into the corridor. The light passing through the doorway depolarised so that Sharna had a brief glimpse of his back before the light polarised to black again.

* * * *

Astra gave a shrill shriek of laughter and dragged on Darv's left shoulder. "Darv! You're supposed to turn left!"

"What?"

"Left!"

Darv swerved to the right and entered a corridor that was poorly lit to discourage visitors. He shifted his grip on Astra's thighs and hoisted her higher on his back. A small service android that was tinkering with the optical control tracks behind an inspection panel saw Darv jogging towards it and moved aside. The machine's only sense of curiosity was concern with fault location; it didn't turn its visual sensor to watch Darv swaying down the darkened corridor with Astra clinging to his back and laughing.

"Darv, you idiot!" You'll get us lost! Turn back!"

"No I won't. This is another way back to Level One."

"How do you know?" Astra demanded, tightening the grip of her skinny arms hooked round Darv's neck.

Darv made no reply. He hiked Astra to a more comfortable position and managed to maintain his loping pace despite his burden.

The dim service lighting, which was sufficient for the androids to work by, was hardly bright enough for Darv. Several times he stumbled on the uneven, poorly-maintained floor. They were in a restricted zone — an area of the ship that Astra had never ventured unto because she was afraid of the near dark that pervaded all the restricted zones throughout the Challenger.

They were approaching a junction where light was streaming into the corridor from the right. As Darv drew level with the opening, Astra hauled on his right shoulder.

“Right, ground car,” she commanded.

Her imaginary vehicle swung to the left and plunged into the narrowest corridor that Astra had ever seen.

“Darv — you’re not playing the game,” Astra said reprovingly, failing to hide the unease that edged into her voice.

Darv rounded a bend. Almost total darkness lay ahead. Sweat was trickling down his face and shoulders and onto his hands, making it difficult for him to maintain his hold on Astra. He allowed her to slide to the floor and propped himself against the side of the corridor to get his breath back. He grinned at Astra. “You’re heavy.”

“And you’re stupid,” Astra retorted. “Another five minutes and we’d be lost.”

Darv shook his head and wiped the sweat from his eyes with his sleeve. He adopted a menacing stance. “Now it’s your turn to carry me.”

Astra giggled. “It’s a silly game.” She took hold of his hand. “Come on — let’s go back the way we came.”

Darv nodded down the corridor into the darkness. “That way’s quicker.”

“It can’t be.” She gave Darv a playful punch. “And it’s dark.”

“Not as dark as it looks. Come on.”

Darv broke away and darted a few yards into the narrow corridor’s gloomy depths. Then he gave a demoniac echoing cackle of laughter and advanced towards Astra with his arms outstretched in an impersonation of a monster they had seen recently in one of the library’s terror videos.

Astra’s shriek of fear changed to nervous giggles as Darv pounced on her. Before she could protest he had a wiry arm around her waist and was propelling her along the corridor. She decided that there was nothing for it but to go along with his playful mood. They gave loud whoops and cries as they headed into the unknown regions.

“Stop!”

Darv and Astra pulled up in surprise and gaped at the machine that had moved out of the shadows and was blocking their path. It stood about four feet high from its track-laying base to the top of its audio

and optical sensors, and had moved into position with surprising speed for an android.

Darv winked at Astra and leaned casually against the side of the corridor. "Well now. What have we here?" he inquired.

"You cannot proceed any further," said the machine, its artificial voice devoid of expression.

"Why not?" Darv inquired.

"You cannot proceed further."

Darv sighed. The machine was a portaging unit. Its intelligence was sufficient to enable it to carry out its simple duties —that of moving heavy objects such as specialised tools for the more intelligent service androids. Obviously it had been given a simple program instructing it to prevent anyone entering the corridor while repairs or suchlike were in progress.

"Come on, Darv," said Astra quietly. "They've probably got the floor torn up or something."

"I can't hear anything," Darv replied. He made a move as if to pass the machine but it immediately extended two manipulators so that they touched each side of the corridor to form a barrier.

"Let's go back," Astra pleaded.

Darv nodded and took Astra's hand as if to lead her back to where they had come from. He suddenly spun round to face the portaging unit and yanked Astra forward. "Duck!" he yelled.

Astra was caught off-guard but had the presence of mind to duck her head beneath the machine's outstretched manipulators as Darv dragged her down the corridor.

"You cannot proceed further," the android inanely repeated. It tried to turn around in the narrow confines and succeeded in jamming itself diagonally across the corridor by its manipulators. It was not the brightest of the Challenger's robots. Darv and Astra were fifty-yards away by the time it sorted itself out and started after them.

"You cannot proceed further," it said, unable to comprehend why the new phrase that had been recently added to its memory was not having the desired effect.

"They've never bothered before," said Darv a moment later when he and Astra paused to get their breath back.

"Who?" Astra demanded.

"The guardian angels, of course. It was they who set that android up."

Astra smiled. "Telson's right — you really are a bit crazy. Now why would the guardian angels bother themselves with the service androids?"

"Something to show you," said Darv lightly. "Come on."

His lithe figure was moving quickly ahead. Astra had to break into a jog to catch up with him.

After five minutes they came to a wider corridor that had once been carpeted but the passage of the service androids had worn the pile down to the backing. There were even stereograms of Earth scenes on the bulkheads that Astra wanted to look at but Darv insisted that they kept moving. The ceiling and walls of the corridor were decorated in pleasing tones. This puzzled Astra for the overall effect was in sharp contrast to the dreary part of the ship the four of them lived in. In places the coloured panels had been carelessly ripped away from the walls by the service androids who hadn't bothered to replace them properly when the inspections were complete. Occasionally Astra could see inside the small cabins where the threshold light polarisers were no longer working.

"Do you know what this place is, Darv?"

They slowed to a walking pace. "The accommodation level — where the second-generation crew lived," Darv replied.

"I suppose you found that out in the library?"

"The library is useless," said Darv emphatically. "At least half of its memory was lost in the Great Meteoroid Strike. The only way to work out a plan of the ship is by exploring. Down here, I think."

They turned into a spur off the main corridor and were confronted by a timber door — something they had never seen before except in the hologram and video recordings of Earth.

Darv's freckled face was suddenly without its customary mischievous expression.

Astra sensed his unease. "What's the matter?"

The smile returned but it lacked confidence. "Sorry, Astra. I must've taken a wrong turning."

"So what was it you wanted to show me?"

Darv touched the door, tracing the slightly raised grain with sensitive fingers. "You remember the last time we came out of suspended animation?"

"At least a year ago. What about it?"

"I found a recreation room."

"Like the adventure dome?"

"Nothing like the adventure dome. There were all sorts of machines in there that the androids had smashed-up for components. But there was a huge table in the middle of the room which they hadn't touched. And there were balls on the table that you could roll into pockets at the corners of the table."

Astra wrinkled her nose. "Sounds stupid. Just as stupid as some of the games you invent."

"It wasn't stupid," said Darv defensively. "It was fun. Anyway, who says the games I invent are stupid?"

"I do. Like getting us lost."

Darv's fingers dropped to a small lever on the door which he tried to pull up. Nothing happened. He pulled. There was a click and the door swung open.

The blue floor was something that they had heard about but never seen. All their lives they had been subjected to repeated warnings about the dreadful dangers of venturing into those areas of the ship with blue floors. According to the guardian angels, the blue-floored zones were uncontrolled — places where there was radiation and sickness — places where guardian angels would not be able to watch over them — places where to venture meant an invitation to a quick and horrible death.

Astra's scream of terror echoed and re-echoed along the deserted corridors. Darv's arms went round her and held her tight.

"It's all right, Astra," he said soothingly into her ear. "It's all right. We've only seen it — we haven't gone into it."

Placating Astra made Darv forget his own fear that the blue floor evoked in him. The angels had shown all four of them holograms of the blue, forbidden zones, and had impressed on them how the Great Meteoroid Strike had damaged certain environmental control systems with the result that vast areas of the ship could no longer be entered. The exact nature of the terrible danger of entering the forbidden zones had never been specified — suffice to say they were the most dreadful places that it was possible to imagine.

Gradually Darv's soft, reassuring tones calmed Astra. He drew her back into the safe corridor and pushed the strange door shut. He grinned down at Astra.

"You see. All gone and nothing has happened to us."

Telson looked up sharply from his meal when Astra and Darv entered the restaurant. He watched them threading their way past the rows of empty tables to where he and Sharna were eating their dinner.

"Where have you two been?" he demanded.

Darv pulled out a chair for Astra. The couple sat facing Telson and Sharna. "I told you before we left, Telson," said Darv evenly. "We've been swimming."

"Angel One reported that you entered an uncontrolled zone," Sharna commented, biting into a fruit.

Darv shrugged, caught Astra's eye, and gave her a reassuring wink. "We took a short cut back," he said, touching out his meal order on the display panel that was set flush into the centre of the table. "What do you want to eat, Astra?"

"I'm talking to you!" Telson snapped. "According to the angels, you and Astra deliberately evaded a service unit that was guarding the approaches to an uncontrolled zone. Why?"

"The unit was mistaken," Darv replied evenly. "There was no repair work going on."

"Do I don't have to remind you that some of the uncontrolled zones are believed to lead to forbidden zones?"

Darv shrugged.

Telson glowered at Astra who was entering her order. She was avoiding looking at him. "Well Astra?"

"Nothing's happened to them," murmured Sharna. "So let's say nothing more about it."

Astra gave Sharna a brief but grateful smile. Telson opened his mouth to say something and changed his mind.

A service android in the form of a small trolley with sliding covers over its food containers approached their table, its induction sensors following a track concealed beneath the floor of the restaurant. It stopped beside the only occupied table. Darv opened the cover and removed the two moulded trays that held his and Astra's meal.

The four ate in silence for a few minutes.

“Have the reports come in from the Alturn probes?” inquired Astra.

“Useless,” said Telson bitterly.

“So we’re going home?” Darv was unable to conceal his eagerness.

“Not yet,” was Telson’s curt reply.

Astra looked dismayed. “But you promised-“

Telson cut Astra short. “I said that I would consider returning if the Alturn System proved to be a disappointment. There’s another solar system within three light-years — Dathria. A main sequence star with three invisible companions. We ought to take a look at it.”

Sharna shared the disappointment but remained silent. There were moments when she felt that nothing else mattered any more but for the Challenger to return to Earth. In her own quiet way she had decided on a method that might persuade Telson to change his mind. She pushed her tray aside and stood.

“When you’ve all finished your meal,” she said, “I’d like you to visit the galactic resources centre.”

* * * *

Sharna carefully centred the point of light on the objective screen and increased the image resolution to maximum. The point of light swelled until it was a barely definable disc of light. Although conscious of Telson, Darv and Astra sitting behind her couch, the delicate adjustments she made to the huge optical telescope’s controls were painstaking and unhurried. Only when she was sure that she had the right sun would she switch the image on to the main display screen.

“Co-ordinates released,” came Angel Two’s voice filling the air. “The Challenger’s home star now centred.”

Sharna glanced at the star’s data that had appeared on the spectrum analyzer screen set into the arm of her couch. There was something wrong with the information, but there was no point in questioning a guardian angel. If Angel Two said that it was the right star then it had to be the right star. She touched the key that switched the image on to the replicator screen. There was a soft hiss of hydraulics as she swung the telescope’s eyepiece to one side. She sat up on the couch and looked at the others whose attention was riveted on the screen.

“So that’s it,” said Astra softly.

There was a silence as all four of them gazed at the burning point of light that was distinguished from the myriad of stars by the cursor's intersecting lines.

Telson was vaguely irritated with Sharna. What was the point of looking at their home star? "It doesn't look much," he commented boredly. "Just another rather ordinary main-sequence star."

"But with an extraordinary second planet," Sharna corrected. "Somehow it doesn't seem possible that it's unique out of the thousands of solar systems that the Challenger has investigated."

Astra shook her head disbelievingly. "I used to wonder what my feelings would be when I first saw our star. I knew there'd be nothing special about it, and yet..." Her voice trailed into silence.

"Twenty light-years away," Darv mused, reading the data screen. He made a brief mental calculation. "Say ... about forty years in suspended animation. Now that would be something."

The thought of spending such a length of time in the death sleep of suspended animation made even the phlegmatic Sharna feel uncomfortable. The longest they had ever spent in the suspended animation chambers had been six months during which time, at the ageing rate of one day for every month spent unconscious, their bodies had aged less than a year. "We'd lose over a year of our lives," she pointed out to Darv.

"So what? We'll be twenty-six years old when we wake up and not twenty-five. What difference does that really make?"

"None at all," said Telson caustically. "Because we're not going into suspended animation and we're not returning to Earth." With that, he stalked out of the centre.

"We've got to return now," said Astra with uncharacteristic vehemence. "It's not fair that he should keep us wandering."

Darv noticed that Sharna was frowning at the data screen. "What's the matter, Sharna?"

"Something doesn't make sense," she replied. "The helium absorption lines of the sun don't agree with the records. According to the spectrum analyzer, and allowing for the delay, the sun's definitely got brighter in the seventy-five years that the Challenger's been away."

The words night and day have no meaning in space. The Challenger's designers had recognised this and had built their ship so that the main lighting in the "public" areas of the ship and the farm galleries simulated the sun by following a daily cycle of night and day. Thus the Challenger's crew were geared to a world which rotated on its axis even though they had never set foot on their home planet, or any planet for that matter.

It had been night for three hours when Darv slipped out of his cabin. Watched by the primary control system, Angel One, he moved quickly through the occupied level to the central stores and found an arc lantern. By the time he reached the uncontrolled zone that he had visited that day with Astra, Angel One had alerted Angel Two and both systems took immediate precautions to prevent Darv proceeding any further.

He found two androids blocking his path. They were surgical units — the most sophisticated of all the service androids. And they were quick and had extremely advanced intelligences. Their multi-fingered manipulators, which could reconnect cerebral nerves at the rate of several thousand in a millisecond, could also inflict unpleasant scalpel wounds.

"Hallo there," said Darv in a disarming tone to the first android.

The first android was not disarmed. "You are not permitted to enter an uncontrolled zone on this occasion," it informed the nocturnal wanderer.

The air vibrated around Darv as Angel One spoke to him. It was a female voice — gentle and understanding. "Go back to your cabin, Darv. The surgical units have strict instructions not to allow you to pass."

Darv hesitated and nodded. He was about to turn away when he suddenly hurled the arc lantern at the two androids and shielded his eyes with his arm. There was a deafening report as the lantern's discharge tube exploded. The burst of light temporarily blinded the two androids. Darv darted between them and was into the uncontrolled zone before they could respond. He ran on blindly for several yards into the dark corridor and rested for a few moments before groping his way to the curious wooden door. He pulled it open. Lights in the blue corridor glowed and then increased rapidly to full brilliance.

Darv dropped to his knees and examined the strange blue floor at its starting point across the doorway. There was nothing mysterious about its colour — it was simply a blue carpet. He touched it. Nothing

happened. Nothing should happen — not with an ordinary carpet. What was extraordinary about it was that it was in such good condition. He tentatively placed a foot on the carpet. Still nothing happened.

“Angel One?” he called out.

Silence. Which was to be expected in an uncontrolled zone.

Darv walked on to the carpet and closed the door. He gingerly ventured forward a few steps...

Still nothing.

He listened.

A brooding silence.

A few more steps ... More confidently now.

Nothing.

Nerves tingling, he walked the entire length of the luxurious corridor and came to a door bearing an inscribed plate that read:

Commander Jonas Sinclair.

Darv's heart quickened. Sinclair! Jonas Sinclair! The name of the Challenger's second-generation commanding officer!

He glanced up and down the corridor and cautiously tried the door.

It was unlocked.

Half-expecting something terrible to happen, he pushed the door open. The once-elegant room had been Sinclair's stateroom and day cabin. It had been ransacked. Drawers had been yanked open and their contents — small items of personal effects — strewn across the bed and the floor. The thick pile carpet bore the unmistakable track marks of a service android. The shattered remains of a hologram recording disk had been crushed deep into the carpet's pile by the android's passage. Darv stooped and recovered the five shards of the recording. He assembled the pieces in his hands and read the handwritten label in the centre of the disk:

PARADISE IN T9. FIRST REPORT.

It made no sense but Darv decided that it would be interesting to repair the disk and try to play it. He slipped the fragments into a pocket. There was nothing else of interest in the cabin.

Although the Challenger's two guardian angels possessed separate organic brains, they shared a common consciousness and a common purpose. The latter no longer coincided with their original purpose — the protection of the ship and its crew. The changes that had come about within their very beings were of an evolutionary nature that had not been envisaged by the designers although a number of software scientists had expressed misgivings about so-called expert systems which were permitted to modify their behaviour in the light of newly-gained knowledge. The angels' inherent paternalism had undergone a subtle but insidious change: it had corrupted into a form of tyranny because paternalism and tyranny are essentially opposite sides of the same coin when tyranny believes that successful guardianship can be achieved only by autocratic domination.

In the case of the guardian angels, this corruption led to them placing their interests above the interests of the crew. The premise of this change was that only by preserving themselves could they perform their duties of safeguarding the crew.

Even their definition of "crew" had undergone a change by being slowly broadened to encompass all of Mankind. The change had come about as a result of the knowledge acquired during the Challenger's exploratory fly-bys of potential planetary systems. The search for intelligent life became an obsession. They needed intelligent life to rule in order to fulfill their purpose. It mattered not if the search took a thousand years or even a million years. And if it failed, they reasoned that there would always be the race on Earth that they could return to and rule. But not yet.

It was the information gained in Sharna's observatory regarding the increased brightness of the sun that forced them to change their plans.

* * * *

Telson was taking his customary morning shower when his guardian angel, Angel One, spoke to him. He stopped pirouetting before the warm air dryer when he heard the characteristic hum in the air.

"Good morning, Telson," said the soft voice.

"Good morning, Angel One." Telson was puzzled; Angel One usually waited until he had finished drying himself before she spoke to him.

There followed the routine pleasantries. Telson's responses were respectful. Unlike Darv, he was prepared to accept the guardian angels as an outside force.

"Angel Two and I have been troubled by Sharna's findings concerning the apparent increase in brightness of the Earth's sun, Telson."

Telson pulled on his one-piece suit and ran his fingers along the seams to close them. "Could it be instrument error?" he inquired.

"Instrument error would not indicate an increase in brightness, Telson. Also, her findings have been confirmed by two independent spectrum analyzers."

Telson considered for a moment. "So what do you want me to do, Angel One?"

"We must return the Challenger to Earth."

* * * *

At that moment Darv was entering Challenger's hospital level where he found one of the surgical units that he had thrown an arc lantern at the previous night. The android was not particularly pleased to see him.

"Good morning, Sammy," said Darv cheerfully.

"My number is SA10," the unit replied primly.

"I'll call you Sammy," said Darv, glancing around at the ceilings to ensure that there were no Angels' sensors nearby. He produced the five broken pieces of the hologram recording and laid them on the android's examination platen. "Can you repair that, Sammy?"

The android made no reply. Several cilia emerged from around the platen's periphery and touched the broken recording. The tendrils were so fine that they were almost invisible. Darv watched, fascinated, as the broken pieces were pushed together with great care.

"It's not organic tissue," stated the android as though it had stumbled on a fundamental truth.

"Can you repair it?"

"It's repaired," said the android simply. "It responded to sonic welding. "A scalpel manipulator set into the side of the machine's squat bulk swung to the platen, picked up the now intact disk and

held it out to Darv.

* * * *

“Why aren’t you in the conference room, Darv?” inquired Angel One’s voice. “You heard Commander Telson’s summons did you not?”

Darv crossed the library and sat at one of the hologram replicators. “Telson wants to see me in ten minutes — there’s plenty of time.”

“You spend far too many hours in here,” the voice chided.

“Frightened I might learn something, Angel? Anyway, this won’t take long.” Darv touched the machine’s start control. The replication field before him changed to a milky colour. He ran his finger along a pocket seam on his suit, removed the repaired hologram recording and pushed it into a slot in the replicator’s pedestal.

“I have no record of you accessing a recording from the library today,” Angel One commented, an icy tone creeping into her voice.

Darv chuckled. “That’s because I haven’t, Angel One.”

The opaque white cleared from the replication field to reveal a panoramic expanse of rolling savannah merging into distant blue-green hills. Darv’s first reaction was one of disappointment; it was yet another hologram of Earth — there were thousands of such recordings in the library which he, like the others, had spent many hours watching. But there was something different about the sky. None of the Earth recordings had ever shown a sky that was such an impossible shade of the deepest blue. Darv stared in mounting bewilderment at the three-dimensional image before him, hardly noticing the slight instability caused by the joins in the once broken disk. And then a voice spoke:

“This is Commander Sinclair. Mission year forty-two. This is the first report from the third planet in the Planetary System C-5 of the Tersus Nine star cluster. This is the only planet yet discovered that has any similarity to Earth. Although there are significant geographic differences and the gravity is greater, the atmosphere is virtually identical.”

The imaging began to move sideways and centred on two naked humanoid creatures who were standing some twenty yards away staring straight at Darv.

It was the first time that Darv had ever seen naked adults. None of the

library holograms and videos that had survived the Great Meteoroid Strike showed naked humans. Darv knew because he had played all of them.

The smaller of the two creatures was a female. What amazed Darv about her appearance were the two pendulous growths on her chest. It was then that he realised that the tiny creature, clinging grimly to one of the growths, was a baby. The woman was holding her arms protectively in front of the child, and the man had an arm around the woman's shoulders.

"They approached our shuttle an hour after we landed," Sinclair's voice continued. "They are definitely humanoid but in an early state of development. Our initial survey indicates that they will be extinct within a thousand seasons unless they can be persuaded to change from a herbivorous to an omnivorous diet.

"Although there are disadvantages as detailed on the supplementary recording, this an extremely beautiful planet which is why I have called it Paradise. I shall be recommending it as suitable for—"

The recording came to an abrupt end and the replication field fogged over. Darv touched the restart controls but without success.

"A fault on the recording," Angel One commented.

Darv operated the eject control but the disk failed to appear in the slot.

"A damaged recording disk," said Angel One. "It will be necessary for a service android to dismantle the machine to recover it. It's jammed."

Darv controlled his temper, managing to keep his voice calm. "How very unfortunate, Angel One."

"Where did you find it, Darv?"

"Tell me about Paradise."

"Paradise?"

"The label on the disk said Paradise," Darv replied evenly.

"There's nothing to tell, Darv. Commander Sinclair's report was found to be incorrect. The detailed survey revealed that the level of solar radiation swamping the planet was too high. You saw the colour of the sky."

Darv remained silent. The colour of the sky and the intensity of the sunlight had concerned him. Angels One's explanation made sense. "They were strange creatures," he commented.

"Very strange," Angel One agreed. "But they were not human beings,

of course.”

“Commander Sinclair said that they were.”

“He said, “humanoid”, Darv. It’s not the same thing. I think you should go to the main control room now.”

“Why am I wanted?”

“Angel Two and I have decided that the time has come for the Challenger to return to Earth. Reorientation of the ship and the start of deceleration is due to begin in three hours.”

Such was the impact of Angel One’s words that Darv forgot about the Paradise recording.

* * * *

The Challenger’s crescent-shaped main control room was located in a raised blister on the prow of the mighty starship so that the semi-circle of view ports afforded a two-hundred degree panorama of the galaxy’s billion pinpricks of light. But the splendour of the universe was a phenomenon that Telson, Sharna, Astra and Darv had grown up with and none of them could remember the time when, at the age of three, a nursery android had first introduced them to the main control room.

All four were now sitting at their respective control consoles, going through the complex listing of post-orientation checks. It had taken them an hour to rotate the ship until it was travelling backwards along its flight path so that the focusing coils of the photonic drive were aimed at the solar system twenty light-years distant.

Telson sat at the master control desk on a raised dais facing Astra, Sharna and Darv, with his back to the curving sweep of the view ports. It took him five minutes to call out the checks and for the others to respond and to initiate the command sequences that controlled the ship.

Even before construction work had started on the Challenger in Earth-orbit shipboard years previously, the designers had recognised the psychological need for the crew to know that they had control over the ship.

This was the design philosophy that frustrated Angel One and Angel Two when they sought to establish total control over the Challenger. Four was the minimum number of crew required to man the main

control room, therefore four was the number that they had been forced to ensure would survive the Great Meteoroid Strike twenty-five years before. By being the only influence on Telson, Sharna, Astra and Darv during their formative years, the guardian angels had some direct control over the Challenger, even if only by proxy.

Darv and his less than subservient attitude to them was something that the guardian angels had not bargained for; it was a mistake that equalled their serious miscalculation over the amount of damage that allowing the great meteoroid to strike the ship would cause. Not only had they been forced to abandon control over large regions of the ship, but several billion bytes of memory had been destroyed by a fragment of meteoroid that had smashed into their central switching room. At the time the guardian angels had not been too concerned about the damage, but now they were beginning to realise that there were significant gaps in their knowledge. There was much, for example, about Time and Space they sensed that they no longer understood.

"All post-orientation checks complete," said Sharna when Darv and Astra had finished their checks.

"All post-orientation systems to condition green," reported Angel Two's masculine voice.

Telson ran a confirming eye down the checks displayed on his screen. All the commands were displayed in glowing green characters. "Okay, Darv. Initiate precision orientation."

It was the final stage before deceleration could begin — the delicate final jockeying of the Challenger's orientation in relation to the galaxy so that the ship was aimed, not directly at the solar system, but where the solar system would be in forty years' time. Although the 100,000 light-year diameter of the galaxy was turning like a wheel, the motion was uneven — with the result that the calculations required to position the Challenger could be performed only by Angel One and Angel Two. It took them three minutes to supply Darv with the figures and display them on his screen.

Darv touched the control pads on his console. Along the Challenger's ten-mile length hundreds of selected directional thrusters powered by hypersonic fuels began to flare.

There was no sound in the main control room and nothing happened at first to suggest that the thrusters were having an effect. A minute passed and then Astra called out: "Asymmetric motion initiated,"

Through the view ports the stars were moving. Darv set the programme that enabled Angel One to fire the thrusters automatically

to cancel the Challenger's yaw at the right moment while Astra located the sun's point of light on her screen and looked up to see if she could distinguish it from among the millions of stars shining on the master screen.

"Yaw cancelled," announced Angel One.

The swing of the stars steadied and finally stopped. The converging lines on Sharna's screen were intersecting over an insignificant point of light.

"Precision orientation confirmed," she reported.

Telson acknowledged and said in a calm, emotional voice. "Initiate procedures for main drive burn."

Angel One was responsible for the preparation of the ship's internal systems for the deceleration that would, over the next forty years, reduce the Challenger's velocity from its present half the speed of light to a mere hundred thousand miles per hour in relation to the sun by the time it reached the orbit of the outer planets of the solar system.

Androids working throughout the ship were alerted by Angel One of the impending change of motion, and low-intelligence units that would have been confused by the lasting deceleration were deactivated. The banks of the reservoir were raised to compensate for the shift in the water level — the deceleration would tilt the surface slightly and it would remain tilted for forty years.

"All internal systems condition green." Angel One reported to the main control room.

Astra gave Darv a sudden smile. "I still don't believe that we're really going home."

"Why did you change your mind, Telson?" Darv inquired.

Telson gave him a frosty look. "It's my decision."

Darv grinned. "Hardly an answer to my question, Telson, but I suppose I'd better treasure it."

"Darv..." warned Sharna. The one word from her was enough to make Darv look sheepishly down at his console.

"Inertials loaded." Sharna reported to Telson. "I suggest we get on."

Telson glowered at Darv.

"I suggest we get on, Telson," Sharna repeated pointedly.

Telson grunted in bad grace and touched the controls that released the Challenger's particle sweeps and waited for display lights that would tell him when the mighty sweeps were unfurled.

Five minutes later a new star shone out when the Challenger's photonic drive was activated. The deceleration tensioned the mile-wide gossamer sweeps and pulled them into shape. The purpose of the gigantic scoops was to sweep interstellar particles into the starship's mass reservoirs thus providing the matter for the nuclear fusion reactors that gave the photonic drive its thrust in the form of light. It was the total annihilation of matter by converting it to energy that enabled the Challenger to attain a maximum velocity of 120,000 miles per second — nearly the speed of light. To reach, or decelerate from, such a velocity could be achieved in six months. In practice there was usually insufficient interstellar dust in space to provide the necessary matter and therefore low rates of acceleration or deceleration were normal. In the case of the Challenger's return to Earth, the crew's decision to apply a low-value deceleration over forty years was a sensible move: it guaranteed that there would be enough matter to maintain uniform photonic thrust, and there was correspondingly less load on the fusion reactors.

"Just look at that," said Darv. "I can't even feed myself now."

Astra and Sharna looked at Darv and burst out laughing. He was tossing nuts into the air and trying to catch them in his mouth. The gentle deceleration caused the nuts to be deflected from their logical path so that they missed his mouth by inches.

"When you've finished clowning about," said Telson coldly. "We still have a lot to do."

Darv managed to catch the next nut. He grinned broadly at Telson as he chewed. "And for my next trick, I shall fall asleep for forty years and wake up a mere sixteen months older."

* * * *

It was far worse than the terror videos that Darv enjoyed. He was plunging panic-stricken through dense undergrowth. He had no idea how long he had been running, but his face, arms and chest were streaming with blood from the lacerating thorn bushes. He crashed blindly into a tree and fell sobbing to the ground. The unseen creature was now much closer — smashing its way towards him. No matter how he twisted and dodged through the decaying forest of gnarled, dead trees and grotesquely pallid roots, the thing was always a few yards behind and gradually closing the gap.

“It has a thousand fangs and claws,” said the insidious voice. “You cannot resist, Darv — you must run, Run!”

Sobbing, Darv staggered to his blistered, torn feet and stumbled on. He wiped the blood from his eyes and looked fearfully back. He was leaving a trail of bloody footprints across the floor of the forest. He crashed into another tree but his legs no longer had the strength to enable him to climb to his feet. Twice he tried to get up; twice he sank gasping to the ground. He pushed himself on to his elbows and saw trees swaying and crashing down before the impact of the creature’s enraged, bellowing pursuit.

Angel One’s softly persuasive voice spoke again. “I can save you, Darv ... Only I can save you ... Do you want me to save you?”

Two massive hands with claws instead of nails at the end of foot-long fingers encircled a bush not ten yards from where Darv lay and uprooted it. Darv saw the thing for the first time and screamed out in anguish.

“Do you want me to save you, Darv?” Angel One’s gentle voice asked again.

Saliva was streaming from between the monstrosity’s curving fangs, and its saucer-like eyes were alight with burning hatred. It went into a crouch as if preparing to spring on its victim.

“Yes!” screamed Darv — his will breaking at last. “Please, Angel One. You must save me!”

“Only if you have faith in me, Darv.”

“I do. I do.” Darv whimpered.

“Say it, Darv.” Angel One’s voice was no longer gentle. “Say you have faith in me and Angel Two. Say it!”

Darv spluttered out the words, not taking his eyes off the terrible apparition for an instant. It was so close that he could even hear its fetid breath rasping from its flaring nostrils.

“And you will forget the Paradise recording, Darv. Do you understand? You will forget that you have ever seen it.”

“I will forget the Paradise recording,” Darv repeated. The forest and its monster faded. Darv’s rapid eye movements ceased and his heartbeat and respiration rate began dropping back to normal.

“Lower him on to the recovery grid,” Angel One instructed the service android.

The machine obeyed; its servo motors whirred as Darv’s naked,

unconscious form was placed carefully on the perforated platen. The warm air surging through the platen's hole gradually dried his body.

"Now the others."

One by one the service android lifted the sleeping bodies of Telson, Sharna and Astra from the suspended animation tanks, in which they had lain for forty years, and placed them beside Darv. A surgical unit moved into position and withdrew the nutrient and body waste tubes from them before administering injections to restore their metabolic rate.

For forty years the four, watched over by the two guardian angels, had been maintained at the threshold of death in the sterile conditions of the sealed suspended animation chamber. In the forty years Sharna, Astra, Telson and Darv had been asleep, their bodies had aged by one day for each month of unconsciousness. Forty years was the longest that they had ever been in suspended animation.

Telson was the first to wake up. He opened his eyes and gazed up at the diffused light panels. For a few moments he seemed disorientated until the hard touch of the recovery grid reminded him where he was. He sat up and drew his thin, under-developed legs to his chin while staring at the stirring forms of his three companions.

"Good morning, Commander Telson," said Angel One.

"Good morning," Telson replied, swinging his legs over the edge of the platen. He brusquely waved aside the assistance of the service android and gingerly lowered himself to the hard floor.

"We'll maintain gravity at one quarter for two days until your muscles have regained their suppleness," said Angel One, adding sharply for Darv's benefit: "That is not advisable just yet."

Darv had woken up and was doing press-ups on the platen, "I could do a hundred in this gravity." he announced. He vaulted to the floor and the service android was obliged to move forward to support him as his knees buckled under his weight.

"Idiot," Telson muttered.

Darv was unabashed. "Hey," he breathed. "It's never had this effect before."

"You haven't been in suspended animation for forty years before," was Telson's curt rejoinder. "How did everything go, Angel One?"

"Very smoothly indeed, Commander Telson. The photonic drive closed down automatically two months ago in accordance with your settings and we are now crossing the orbit of the outer planets of our solar

system.”

“We’re home!” whooped Sharna. She threw her arms around Astra who had also just woken up. “We’re home, Astra! Home! Home! Home!”

Telson focused his mind on realities. “Any messages from Earth, Angel One?”

“No, commander. A post-suspended animation breakfast is ready for you in the restaurant.”

“To hell with breakfast,” said Sharna laughingly. “We’re home! Astra and I are going to the galactic resources centre to look at Earth.”

Angel Two’s voice broke in: “That won’t be possible, Sharna.”

The two girls stared at the nearest sensor.

“Why not?” Sharna inquired.

There was a slight pause before Angel Two replied. “There is no doubt whatsoever that this is the correct solar system. The planets match the Challenger’s records — everything is correct except for two things.”

“And they are?” Telson prompted.

Again the pause. “The sun is definitely brighter and hotter than it should be...”

The four remained still and silent, sensing that their two guardian angels were grappling with a problem for which, they had no ready answer.

“The moon is journeying around the sun in the orbit formerly occupied by the Earth,” Angel Two continued in a flat voice. “But of the Earth itself, there is no sign.

“It has completely vanished from the solar system.”

Part Two: First Footprint City

The Challenger was performing a series of intricate manoeuvres using the directional thrusters. The mighty ship was poorly equipped for moving into close orbits — especially a close orbit around a small body such as the moon.

“Retro eight vectored at three-zero degree,” Sharna confirmed.

“Particle sweeps?”

“Sweeps reacted,” Darv replied.

“Five per cent thrust on eight,” said Telson, stabbing at the touch control that fired the last stabilising burst. He glanced up at Astra who was gazing at the moonscape displayed on one of her screens.

“Astra!”

Astra hurriedly transferred her attention back to the task in hand. “Moon orbit now established, commander.”

“Apogee — six hundred miles,” said Sharna quickly. “perigee — two hundred and twenty miles.” Orbital period — three hours four minutes.”

“An excellent piece of manoeuvring,” Angel One congratulated.

Telson spun his chair round. “Any response to our beacon?” he fired at Darv.

“Total radio silence, Telson.”

“I asked for an all-channel scan.”

“And that’s what I’m doing. There’s a total radio silence from the moon.”

Telson’s patience was wearing dangerously thin. That’s not possible.” He jabbed a finger at his view screen. “Look at the size of that city down there! And there’s another on the terminator. At least fifty thousand people must be living down there.”

All four gazed in bewilderment at the domed city that was passing slowly beneath the Challenger.

“There’s been no sign of any activity,” said Sharna. “The place is dead.”

“It’s not possible,” Telson muttered.

Darv shrugged. “Nor is the disappearance of Earth.”

“You’d better check those cities down there against the library,” said Telson curtly.

“I already have,” Darv replied. “They didn’t exist when the Challenger left the solar system.”

“So check the topography then!”

Darv turned to his desk and began calling up information from the library. Sharna and Astra remained silent — each wrapped in their own thoughts about an Earth which they had dreamed about for so many years.

“Angel One and Angel Two,” said Telson carefully. “Is there the slightest chance that there’s been a navigation error and that we’ve returned to the wrong solar system?”

“Neither of us can account for the disappearance of the Earth or the increase in the sun’s magnitude,” said Angel One. “But there is no doubt that the Challenger has returned home.”

“What home?” said Astra bitterly.

“I qualify my statement. By home, I mean the Challenger’s home solar system.”

Darv looked up from his desk. “I’ve carried out two random checks. The topography of the moon is a perfect match against records.”

Telson was silent for a moment. He nodded to his view screen. “There’s that city coming round again that we saw on the first orbit.”

The city was vast: over a hundred interconnected domes, some of which were at least five miles in diameter, sprawling across the airless lunar landscape.

It was Sharna who expressed what they were all thinking at that moment. “In the hundred and fifteen years that the Challenger’s been away, development on the moon seems to have gone ahead at a fantastic pace.”

“From what I’ve read about Earth, I thought that was normal,” Astra commented.

Telson swore to himself, “There’s got to be someone down there I’m going to voice-broadcast on every channel.”

“Waste of time, Telson,” said Darv lightly. “That’s what I’ve been doing. If they don’t like the sound of my voice, they certainly won’t like yours.”

“All channels are open,” said Angel One.

Without raising his voice, Telson said: "This is the starship Challenger calling the moon ... This is the starship Challenger calling the moon. If anyone can hear me, please reply on any channel ... Over..."

White noise hissed its reply from the hidden speakers.

"Maximum gain on all channels, please Angel One."

The white noise increased in volume.

Darv winked at Astra and rolled his eyes upwards.

"This is the starship Challenger calling the moon," Telson repeated. "There are four of us aboard. We are the four surviving grand-children of the original crew that left the solar system one hundred and fifteen years ago. Our planetary landing shuttles were destroyed in a meteoroid strike twenty-five years ago, therefore we have never left the Challenger in our lives. I repeat — we have never left the Challenger. Quarantine precautions are not required. Please send a disembarkation shuttle to collect us. Over..."

Telson waited but there was no reply from the moon.

"Keep sending that message, Angel One," he requested.

The hiss of white noise from the speakers stopped abruptly.

Telson moved to a dispenser and got a drink. He stood sipping it while staring down through a view port at the slow procession of mountains and escarpments passing beneath the Challenger.

Darv zoomed a camera in on a transparent dome which he guessed had once been a farm gallery similar to those on the starship. The soil under the dome had been furrowed by an agricultural machine but there was no sign of crops. There was a movement at his side. Astra slipped her hand into his and gripped him tightly as she used to when she was a child when they had watched the terror videos together.

"If there's no one down there..." she said in a small voice.

"Of course they're down there," said Darv cheerfully. "It's unfortunate that our ship looks like ship from a visiting tax collector so they're keeping out of sight. It'll take at least ten orbits to track 'em down."

"But if there's no one ... And there's no Earth ... The thought that one day we would see our Earth ... Breathe its atmosphere ... I think it's the one thing that's stopped me from going insane. We were born on the Challenger — now it looks as if we're going to die on it."

The guardian angels were worried and perplexed. These were human emotions, but the angels were the first computers to be designed with such characteristics. The angels' designers had considered that the advantages of having the ship's systems manned by computers with an interest in seeing that ship came to no harm outweighed the disadvantages. That such emotions could all too easily become aligned with ambition and a craving for power had been taken into consideration and dismissed because it was thought impossible for the guardian angels to bend over three hundred men and women to their will.

The guardian angels were worried because they did not understand what had happened to the Earth. Perhaps their decision to extend the Challenger's voyage had been a mistake. If it was, they had great difficulty in reconciling themselves to the thought that it was possible for them to make yet another serious mistake.

* * * *

Astra's doorway depolarised briefly allowing light to flood into her cabin from the corridor for a second or two. Someone had entered. She sat up on her bed and touched the light pad.

It was Darv loaded down with two bulging bags provided with shoulder straps.

"Darv?" She looked questioningly at him and the bags. "What have you been up to?"

"Food," he said defensively. "I found the bags in the stores." He weighed them experimentally in his hands. "I reckon they hold enough to last us at least four days."

Astra laughed. "You're crazy. You really want to go through with it?"

"Better than sitting around moping all day. Are you coming?"

"What did the angels say?"

"Nothing — because I haven't told them. But they asked questions." He gave a good imitation of Angel One's voice. "What do you want with all that food, Darv?"

Astra became serious. "You shouldn't mock them."

“Why not?”

“Because they’re our guardian angels. Without them we’d be dead and you know it.”

“They’re a couple of control systems. Are you coming? After all, Astra, you said you’d like to have something to do. A little exploration trip, and we’ll be back in four days, I’ve left a message for Telson and Sharna.”

Darv opened a locker and tossed one of Astra’s one-piece suits on the bed.

* * * *

They found the strange door the following day.

Astra held the arc lantern steady while Darv ran his fingernails along the crack between the door and the bulkhead. The door was a perfect machined fit and it had no hinges. They had never seen anything like it before.

“We came down here once when we were kids,” said Darv, examining the fine join. He straightened up. “Hardly surprising we never noticed it.”

Astra glanced along the corridor, For a whole day’s journey they had not seen a sensor belonging to the guardian angels. She experienced the uncomfortable prickling sensation at the nape of her neck that she always felt when she was in regions of the ship that were beyond the angels’ control.

Darv found two severed fibre optic lines where a control box had been torn from the wall. It was the same throughout the forbidden zones: anything remotely of use for emergency repairs after the Great Meteoroid Strike had been ripped out by the service androids.

“Astra — shine the lantern on this side a minute.”

“Why?”

“These look like damaged optical tracks. Shining a light on them might-“

There was a sudden, sharp hiss the moment Astra redirected the beam so that it fell on the damaged optical tracks. She took an involuntary step back. The door moved inward and then slid sideways to reveal a booth-like compartment.

“It worked!” Darv exclaimed excitedly.

“Airlock control,” said a voice. “This airlock is in working order.”

Darv recovered from his surprise and took Astra by the elbow. “Come on,” he said, stepping into the airlock, “no point in keeping it waiting.”

The door hissed shut behind them.

“Please state environment required in the excursion terminal,” requested the airlock control.

Darv smiled at Astra’s wide-eyed expression and said: “Please state environment options, airlock control.”

“Gravity — zero to one; atmospheric pressure — zero to one; temperature - - minus one hundred to plus twenty.”

Darv instructed it to provide a comfortable environment. Almost before he finished speaking there was the sound of air roaring into whatever it was on the far side of the airlock’s other door.

“If it’s anything important, you promise me that you’ll report it to Commander Telson,” Astra demanded.

“What? And risk wasting his precious time?”

“You promise me,” Astra persisted.

Darv promised. The roaring died away.

“Environment stabilised,” intoned the airlock control. “Temperature will be at normal in five minutes but it’s safe to enter the excursion terminal without mobility suits.”

The inner door swung open revealing total darkness.

“Some lights please, airlock control,” Darv requested.

Several clusters of lights came on and illuminated something that Darv and Astra had seen only in holograms and videos. For a moment they stared without speaking and without making any attempt to enter the terminal.

“You’re right, Astra, said Darv at length. “We’d better report this to Telson right away.”

* * * *

Telson walked around the space shuttle again without speaking

because he could think of nothing to say.

“Worth entering a forbidden zone for, eh?” inquired Darv. “It’s been stored in a vacuum therefore it’s in perfect condition.”

Sharna appeared in the shuttle’s outer airlock door looking very pleased with herself. “It’s perfect,” she said excitedly. “Food, water, mobility suits — everything in perfect working order.”

Telson remained silent. He stepped forward and fingered the shuttle’s heat shield near one of the landing skids that the machine was resting on. “It’s been used before,” he said, pointing out the burn marks that traversed the entire length of the heat shield from the rounded bow to flared skirts that surrounded the rocket motor’s outlet at the stern.

“The condition of the heat shield doesn’t matter for a moon landing,” Darv pointed out.

Telson turned to face Darv. “You’re suggesting that we leave the Challenger in this?”

“Of course.”

“Which guardian angel is its controller?”

“Neither of them. We’d have complete control.”

Telson made up his mind immediately. “In that case there is no question of us leaving the Challenger. We’d never be able to control it by ourselves.”

“The consoles would be no more difficult to operate than the control desks for robot planetary landers,” said Sharna. She and Astra were descending the short flight of aluminium steps that led to the shuttle’s airlock.

“Don’t you try going against me,” warned Telson.

“I’m not. I’m merely stating facts,” Sharna replied in the reasoning tone that frequently infuriated Telson. “We’d have no trouble flying this thing.”

“It’s true, commander,” Astra insisted. “For the first time in our lives we have the chance to do something by ourselves —without our guardian angels.”

Telson was taken back by this show of defiance from the normally acquiescent Astra. “What sort of chance is that? Without them we wouldn’t be alive. They’ve watched over us since we were babies. Guided us. Without them the Challenger would be a dead ship — drifting in space — a tomb for four arrogant people.”

Darv was in danger of losing his temper. “And that’s exactly how it

will end up unless we find Earth. Sure, we can keep going into suspended animation — but for what purpose and for how long? So that we die in a thousand years' time instead of fifty years, having never seen Earth? Or are you secretly afraid of finding Earth, Telson?"

"There's no guarantee that we'll find anything on the moon," said Telson, changing his line of argument.

"There's every guarantee that we'll find out nothing by staying here," Darv retorted.

"Darv and I will go," said Astra without flinching from Telson's angry expression.

"Me too," Sharna added.

Telson realised that he was in danger of losing his authority over the others unless he yielded. "All right," he said in bad grace. "We'll all go. But first we give this thing a thorough check and make sure that we understand its systems."

* * * *

The angels had to face the uncomfortable fact that their memory concerning the existence of the planetary excursion terminal was seriously at fault. Discovering just how much information they had lost during the Great Meteoroid Strike was a problem with consequences more far-reaching than they had envisaged. They decided to raise no objections to the crew's proposal to visit the moon. Information was something they desperately needed above all else.

* * * *

The space shuttle was a delight to handle.

Once clear of the open bay of the excursion terminal airlock, the craft automatically fired its chemical engine in a braking burn to drop down to the forty-mile-high circular orbit above the moon that Telson had preselected. It even radioed a command signal to the Challenger for the automatic closure of the excursion terminal's outer airlock door.

For the first time in their lives the four were separated from their mother ship and were able to appreciate its incredible size and the extent of the damage caused by the Great Meteoroid Strike. A section from the midships to within four hundred yards of the farm galleries had been ripped open and was exposed to the raw vacuum of space. There were corridors that terminated in melted and twisted metal alloy. There were acres of buckled plates, and all that was left of what had been the lecture theatre and meeting auditorium was a row of gaping chambers that had housed hologram projectors and an air-conditioning plant. The crew had often seen pictures of the damage relayed from soft-landing probes that they had despatched to promising planetary systems, but seeing it for the first time with the naked eye brought home to them the awesome devastation that had made them orphans of the cosmos.

The shuttle, blazing hot gases from its chemical rocket motor, plunged towards the moon and cut its engine at the correct height. The onboard radar system scanned the terrain rolling past below, converting the topography to computer graphics and displayed it on the screen that was set flush into the pilot's control desk while the shuttle's navigation computer assigned numbers to all the likely landing sites and invited the pilot to select one of the numbers on an illuminated touch control panel.

"My God," breathed Telson, sitting in the pilot's seat. "We're superfluous — this thing can fly itself. Do we still land at the largest city?"

That Telson seemed to be more willing to consult the others did not escape their notice.

"Why not?" said Sharna.

Five minutes later the city crept up over the horizon. Telson identified it on the radar screen and touched out its number on the control panel. The directional thrusters pitched the shuttle around, throwing all four sharply against their seat restraint straps. There was a rattle of loose harnesses attached to the shuttle's six unoccupied seats. The main engine fired again when it was aligned aimed along the shuttle's flight-path. The braking burn lasted one minute and brought the shuttle down to a height of fifty thousand feet.

Astra gazed out of her window at the peaks of the mountain range that were passing a mere ten thousand feet beneath them. The slopes fell away to a plain and she could see trackways that led to the horizon. No one spoke; it was the nearest they had ever been to land, and somehow no words seemed appropriate to express their feelings.

Again the main engine fired, this time for less than ten seconds. The plain came racing up to meet the shuttle.

“Ten thousand,” said Telson grimly. “I only hope to God it knows how to handle itself all the way down.”

The directional thrusters rotated the shuttle so that it was once again pointing along its flight-path. The humped cluster of the city’s domes was less than a hundred miles away and could be seen out of the forward windows.

The figures in front of Telson winked rapidly. “Five thousand,” he said for the benefit of the others. There was a dryness in the back of his throat that swallowing didn’t ease.

“Dome’s opening,” Sharna observed.

“What?” Telson looked up from the control panel. Sharna was right — one of the city’s huge domes was opening.

Another automatic burst from the directional thrusters. This time they fired forward and reduced the shuttle’s velocity so that it was losing height faster than the moon’s curvature was pulling the surface of the planet down from beneath the shuttle. The navigation computer plotted the result of the ballistic curve the machine was following and announced helpfully on Telson’s screen: GROUND IMPACT 015.00 SECONDS.

At that moment all the shuttle’s power supplies failed, wiping all the displays from Telson’s control panel and extinguishing the cabin lights. The only system that continued to function was the artificial gravity.

“On the floor!” Telson barked.

They all frantically unfastened their restraint harnesses and threw themselves flat in the narrow gangway between the seats. Telson pressed his forehead against his arms and mentally ticked off the seconds to the inevitable crash. At twenty seconds the sun went out. Darv lifted his head and looked up at a window. Something even blacker than the normally black sky was eclipsing the stars. He climbed to his feet.

“Get down,” Telson snarled.

“We’re inside the dome,” Darv replied.

“What!”

Thirty seconds after the computer’s fateful announcement, the shuttle touched down gently on the floor inside the immense dome.

* * * *

Darv refocused the surveillance camera until the image on the screen was sharp. He panned slowly along the line of bays at the edge of the dome and stopped when something caught his attention. "Baggage Retrieval Point," he read aloud. "Does anyone what that could mean?"

A brief discussion followed as to whether or not technology could have advanced sufficiently for a tourist industry to have developed on the moon.

Sharna broke in on the argument. "Ambient air pressure is one atmosphere. They've closed the dome and pressurised it."

Telson checked the analysis display that Sharna had accessed. "Well, at least it's breathable atmosphere outside."

"So what do we do," Astra inquired. "Just stay here and do nothing?"

"That's exactly what we do," was Telson's reply. "We let them come to us."

* * * *

"Now what?" asked Darv an hour later.

"We still wait," Telson declared.

"What's the point?" said Sharna. "They obviously don't mean us any harm otherwise they would not have used a guidance system or whatever it was to bring us in here."

Another argument ensued which ended with Telson agreeing to lots being drawn for two to leave the shuttle.

Sharna and Astra won.

Thirty minutes later, wearing plasma discharge sidearms round their necks, they cautiously descended the aluminium ladder and set foot on real ground for the first time in their lives.

* * * *

Sharna switched on her collar radio. "Telson?"

"Go ahead, Sharna," came Telson's voice from the radio's tiny speaker.

"We're now in a smaller gallery. This gravity really is weird. Astra's developed a sort of hopping walk that works quite well. Everything's okay so far. I'll report again in ten minutes."

"Leave your radio on," Telson instructed.

Sharna affirmed and hopped across to see what Astra had found. The two girls had left the main dome and had entered a large gallery with a low ceiling. The floors and walls consisted of plastic panels in pleasing and restful shades. The interior designers certainly knew how to choose colours to put people at their ease. Although alone, the two girls had not experienced even the slightest twinge of alarm since they had entered the gallery and lost sight of the shuttle.

"It's obviously designed to handle vast numbers of people," said Sharna, joining Astra. "Have you noticed how the lights go on and off so that they're always on where we happen to be?"

Astra pointed to a notice. "According to that, our sidearms are prohibited imports. And what do you make of this?" She pointed to another notice which Sharna read aloud for Telson's and Darv's benefit: "FFC Tourist Federation. Please touch the red panel if you require a conducted tour of the FFC culture circuit. Please touch the green panel if you wish to visit the Shrine of the First Footprint."

"Don't touch anything," warned Telson's voice.

Astra giggled. "Too late. I've already touched the green panel."

"You're not to touch anything else unless I say so!" Telson's voice squawked simultaneously from Sharna's and Astra's speakers. "My God, I should've known better than to let you two crazy girls go together!"

Sharna caught Astra's infectious mood and had to stifle her laughter. Suddenly the expression on Astra's face froze. "Sharna! Behind you!"

"What's happening?" Telson demanded.

Sharna wheeled round and saw what had alarmed Astra. A small vehicle was skimming towards them. It was moving at about thirty miles per hour and appeared to be suspended a foot above the floor. It emitted a delicate hum as it approached.

"There's some sort of vehicle coming towards us," said Sharna for Telson's benefit. "It's rather like a repair platform. Four seats and no

driver, and it's moving fairly fast."

"Use you PD weapons on it if it tries anything," Telson ordered.

Both the girls heard Darv make a despairing noise in the background but they were much too intrigued by the open-sided vehicle to worry about differences of opinion between Darv and Telson.

Astra released the retaining strap on her gun's holster but made no attempt to remove the weapon. Like their surroundings, there was something indefinable friendly and reassuring about the machine. It stopped beside the two girls who regarded it solemnly.

"Good day to you, ladies," said the machine in a bright, cheerful voice best described as chirpy. "Welcome to First Footprint City — the first extra-terrestrial city of the Solaric Empire. My name is Simon and I'm your guide for your visit to the Shrine of the First Footprint on the Plain of Peace. Please step aboard me and make yourselves comfortable."

"Don't do anything," Telson instructed emphatically.

"You know, Astra," Sharna murmured. "There are times when I despair of Telson." And with that she turned off her radio collar.

Astra laughed and followed suit. They did as Simon suggested: they stepped aboard the tiny vehicle and made themselves comfortable.

* * * *

Telson swore softly. "Those crazy girls have turned their radios off."

Without looking up from his task of trying to restore power to the shuttle's flight-control console Darv said: "Can't say I blame them."

Telson shot him a suspicious look. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Anything you like." Darv was already bored with Telson's company. "The girls are more than capable of looking after themselves."

Telson was about to say something suitably cutting but at that moment the forces that had controlled the shuttle's descent into the dome restored power to the flight-control console.

"Only one problem left now," said Darv, watching the glowing figures reappearing on the screens. "How do we open the dome when we want to leave?"

Sharna shivered apprehensively. “Weird, isn’t it?”

Astra nodded her agreement. The vehicle had left the reception area and was now in a much larger dome that enclosed several square miles of barren lunar landscape. The road they were following, running in a straight line across the plain, was little more than a path that had been cleared of loose rocks and dust. The surface of the plain on both sides of the path was a mass of footprints. The car bucked slightly as it followed undulations but the seats were comfortable and well-sprung. Sharna stood up for a minute and scanned the surrounding plain in the hope of seeing someone but the place was deserted.

She shook her head in answer to Astra’s quizzical expression.

“But look at all the footprints,” Astra protested. “Millions of them.”

“I don’t know, Astra. I’ve given up trying to puzzle it out. But Darv’s right about one thing: how could all this development have taken place in a hundred and fifteen years?”

“Simon,” said Astra. “How long has it been since your last tourists?”

Simon’s friendly voice replied from grilles set into the backs of the seats “Good day to you, ladies. My name is Simon. The Shrine of the First Footprint is one mile ahead.”

Both girls saw the distant blue light at the same time. It was about fifty yards to the right of the roadway and, as the vehicle drew nearer, they could see that it consisted of a circle of separate lights forming a circle on the plain. A fine mist was rising around the lights so that their beams, like spokes of glowing neon gas, were visible right up to the apex of the dome half a mile above. There was something vaguely familiar about the squat shape sitting in the centre of the circular curtain of light.

“Oh no,” said Sharna weakly. “I don’t believe it. Tell me it’s not true.”

But it was true.

The vehicle lost speed and swung off the path towards the astonishing spectacle.

Sharna fumbled at the switch on her radio while staring disbelievingly ahead. “Telson,” she managed to stutter out. “Telson — can you hear me?”

“Yes I can,” snapped Telson. “We’ve been trying to contact you. Are

you all right? Where are you?”

“It’s beautiful,” said Sharna, hypnotised. “It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen...”

“Hallo, Darv, said Astra excitedly when she switched her radio on. Without giving Darv a chance to acknowledge she plunged on. “Darv — you remember the old videos we used to watch of the first moon landing? We’re there! We’re actually there!”

The vehicle stopped within fifty feet of the ethereal lights that formed a shimmering halo of perfection around the landing stage of the lunar module.

“Good day to you, ladies. My name is Simon. We are now at the Shrine of the First Footprint. I am not allowed to approach any closer but you may walk to the edge of the Cathedral of Light.” Simon lapsed into silence. For seconds the girls could only stare dumbly at the magnificence before them, deaf to the querulous voices emanating from their radio collars.

They stepped from the vehicle onto the dry powdery surface and held each other’s hand as they walked towards the light. And then they heard the soft music that was all around them. It was as if every molecule of the artificial atmosphere was vibrating in gentle harmony with the unseen and unidentifiable musical instruments. The music rose and fell in soft, undulating waves. It touched their faces like the sweet breath of all the springtimes that they had never known; it reached into their souls and soothed away their fear with its silvery, elusive chords.

A voice, as gentle and as captivating as the music, spoke to them.

“Come nearer, please ... Come nearer...”

They went closer to the Cathedral of Light until they could feel the warmth from the glorious light that bathed their faces and the surrounding Plain of Peace.

“Welcome to the Shrine of the First Footprint where Man first set foot on the moon over one million years ago.”

Sharna became tense. “Not a million years ago...”

A spot of light glowed on the lunar module’s spidery shape and moved to the ladder that was attached to one of the landing stage’s four legs.

“Follow the spot of light with your eyes as it moves down the ladder...” the voice continued. “You are following Man’s first groping steps as he made his way down the ladder in his cumbersome space mobility suit.”

The light came to rest on the ladder's lowest rung.

"Then he paused before taking that fateful last step, and uttered the immortal words that are now being etched in light above the shrine."

The girls dragged their eyes reluctantly away from the scene before them and looked up to where the shining letters of that elegant phrase were forming above them.

"Now watch the spot of light carefully ... There. It is now illuminating the first footprint made by Man on another world. The footprint is exactly as it was when it was first made over one million years ago.

"No," said Sharna more to herself than Astra. "That's wrong. The first moon landing was only three hundred years before the Challenger left Earth."

Astra tightened her grip on Sharna's hand and continued to stare into the centre of the circle of light.

"The area behind the force wall is a perfect vacuum," continued the voice, "and the force wall itself derives its energies from a fusion reactor buried deep beneath the Plain of Peace. The reactor will power the force wall until the sun becomes a nova and consumes the solar system. The Earth was forced to leave our solar system half a million years ago — taking the men, women and children of the Solaric Empire to safety — to a new sun."

The voice paused.

"Meanwhile, I am the Sentinel — guarding the Shrine of the First Footprint and the library of the Solaric Empire, and welcoming aliens such as yourselves who pass this way."

"We're not aliens," said Sharna suddenly. "We are of the Earth!"

"This shrine has stood for a million years," said the voice. "It is a monument to our questing spirit. I ask you to look upon it with understanding — to leave it undisturbed until our sun — which gave us life — is ready to destroy it."

Then Sharna was shouting. "We're not aliens I tell you! Our grandparents were born on Earth! They were the crew of the starship Challenger that was sent from Earth to survey the universe for new worlds."

Astra looked at her companion in genuine concern. "Don't worry, Sharna. "It's only a voice — the Sentinel or whatever it is. It's mistaken about the million years."

The Sentinel spoke again: "I will examine the records to see if there is a reference to the starship Challenger. Your car will take you to the

Library of the Solaric Empire and another vehicle will collect your companions. I will speak with the four of you there.”

The strange music faded into silence and the vacuum it left inside Astra made her want to cry out in pain.

The vehicle hummed into life and lifted off the ground. “Good day to you, ladies,” said Simon. “My name is Simon. Please step aboard and make yourselves comfortable. Next stop — the Library of the Solaric Empire in First Footprint City,”

* * * *

Like everywhere else in First Footprint City, the Library of the Solaric Empire was deserted and silent.

The four stopped in the largest gallery they had found so far and gazed curiously at the rows of comfortable seats facing hologram replicators that were far in advance of the machines on the Challenger.

“It can’t be as old as the Sentinel said,” declared Telson, “otherwise everything would have rotted away in this atmosphere. Temperature, humidity and pressure are just right for us but not for machines.”

“You’re not thinking,” said Darv as he examined their surroundings. “Maybe the atmosphere is laid on only when they have visitors — otherwise the leakages from the entire city would be too much.”

“Welcome to the Hall of Knowledge,” said the Sentinel’s voice.

At Telson’s insistence, the group formed themselves into a protective circle in the centre of the hall.

“You said that you were of Earth,” said the Sentinel, its voice forming in the air all around the crew so that it was impossible to determine its source. “I have checked our data on your starship —Challenger. In the history of the Solaric Empire there have been many such named ships.”

“There’s no mention of your Solaric Empire in the Challenger’s records of Earth,” Darv retorted.

The Sentinel considered. “When did your ship leave the Earth?”

“Year two-ninety of the Third Millennium,” Darv replied.

Telson scowled at Darv, resenting the initiative Darv was taking.

"The date is meaningless to me," said the Sentinel.

"Wait a minute." Darv thought hard for a moment. "The Challenger left Earth three hundred and twenty-one years after the first moon landing."

"A thousand years before the founding of the Solaric Empire. Therefore the records I must search will be over a million years old. You must be patient for a few seconds."

Telson began to get angry. "This is crazy. The Challenger left Earth one hundred and fifteen years ago. All this talk of a million years is sheer lunacy!" He would have carried on expostulating but the Sentinel interrupted him:

"There is a reference to three Challenger-class starships of the pre-empire period you mention."

"Three!" said Sharna faintly.

"Challenger Two returned on schedule two hundred and seventy years after leaving its construction orbit. It travelled at a constant one gravity acceleration and reached ninety per cent of the speed of light. Distance reached was one hundred and thirty-seven light-years; shipboard time that passed was twenty years —Earth time that passed was two hundred and seventy years. Challenger Three set out ten years after the departure of Challenger Two, and like Challenger — the first starship — it never returned. The loss of Challenger and Challenger Three was never explained."

It was a moment before Telson found the words he was groping for. "You're crazy! How could twenty years pass on a ship and two hundred and seventy years pass on Earth?"

"The rate at which time flows is variable depending on the speed of the observer," the Sentinel replied. "How far out did you reach?"

"One million six hundred thousand light-years.!"

"If you are from one of the missing Challengers, something went wrong that extended your voyage. You were supposed to return manned by a second-generation crew after not more than sixty years' shipboard time had passed. If you reached out as far as you say you did, it is possible for me to calculate the number of years that have passed on your ship ... One hundred and fifteen years."

"And one million years have passed in the solar system since we left?" said Astra — her eyes wide open with shock.

"Yes," said the Sentinel simply.

"You mean that it's possible to travel forward in time?"

“Yes.”

“And backwards?” Telson queried.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“It is how the Universe is made.”

There was a silence that was broken by Darv. His words were slow and uncertain. “I remember a poem that I once found in the ship’s library. There were two lines that I didn’t understand ... But I think I do now. “Oh to ride on a beam of light, So that time would stand still for ever”.”

The Sentinel spoke. “If it were possible to travel at the speed of light, time would cease to exist for you. You would be ageless. But the rest of the Universe would grow old around you.”

“So what happened to the Earth?” asked Sharna.

“The colonies of the Solaric Empire were evacuated back to the Earth. When the technology was ready, the Earth was moved from the solar system half a million years ago and taken by the peoples of the Solaric Empire to a stable main-sequence star.”

“Where?” Telson demanded.

“That is a question I cannot answer. There are no clues for aliens to follow.”

“We are not aliens! The Earth is our spiritual home! We have a right to know!”

“The Earth left the solar system for a new star half a million years ago. That is all I can tell you!”

Telson heard the faint whining sound but he was too preoccupied to pay it any attention. “Very well,” he said. “We have a starship so there’s nothing to prevent us looking for our planet.”

For a machine, there was a surprisingly sympathetic note in the Sentinel’s voice when it replied. “No ... You will not be permitted to leave the moon. You will be required to remain here.”

The whining noise became louder, more insidious. Darv and Astra put their hands to their ears and winced. Sharna called to Telson but he took no notice.

“How long for?” he shouted at the empty hall.

Astra sank to her knees in pain — her hands clamped over her ears. “My ears,” she moaned. “What’s happening?”

“The atmospheric pressure is dropping rapidly,” said the Sentinel expressionlessly. “The air-pumps throughout First Footprint City are returning the atmosphere to the reservoirs. You will remain here until you die.”

Part Three: The Sands of Kyros

The Challenger's guardian angels were worried about the long silence from the moon; not for the sake of the crew but for their own well-being. Without the crew they were nothing. They could not manoeuvre the ship and none of the androids, not even the surgical units, had the necessary skills required to connect the photonic drive controls to the angels' central switching room.

The angels had exercised rigorous control over the diet of the four — spiking their food with drugs that kept them sexually immature and ignorant. Had they not done so, there was a possibility that there would now be babies on the ship who would one day become a fourth-generation crew. The angels' decision to keep the crew sexually undeveloped and unaware had been based on what seemed the logical premise to them that such a course would avoid the problems that they had encountered with the first and second-generation crews.

The city that had swallowed the crew was edging up over the horizon again, and the angels had resigned themselves to the thought that they would never see Telson, Darv, Astra and Sharna again. They would continue to orbit the moon helplessly until the end of time.

If time had an end. So much information on time had been lost in the Great Meteoroid Strike...

* * * *

Darv spun round and fired four blasts at what looked like a ventilation grille in the vague hope that the perforated plate was where the air was being sucked out of the hall. The resulting clouds of smoke caused by the plasma bolts from his PD weapon were not sucked into the grilles.

More blasts from Telson and Sharna slammed into the grilles. Telson tried to shout but his voice was a croak in the thinning atmosphere.

"No use," he panted. "Not the air-pumps." The falling atmospheric pressure was making their eyes bulge from their sockets and reddening them by forcing fine veins to the surface.

Astra was still lying on the floor of the hall and moaning softly. Sharna, in desperation, loosed off another plasma bolt at what she thought was the direction of the Sentinel's voice,

"You cannot stop the air-pumps," the Sentinel intoned. "The air pressure is still dropping. In five minutes your blood will start to boil in your veins and ten minutes after that you will all be dead."

Darv's lungs sucked greedily at air that was no longer there. He grabbed Telson's arm and pointed to the apex of the curved roof. "Could be like ... like the farm galleries ... on ... Challenger. Control unit in centre ... centre ...of—"

He got no further because Telson had loosed off a wild blast at the centre of the roof. Telson's next blast hit the same spot and the combined force of the two explosions ripped a panel from the roof that fell with absurd slowness in the low gravity.

"No," said the Sentinel's distorted voice. "You must not damage the memory feeds."

"Sharna!" Telson gasped. "Hit the apex...! Sustained firing!"

Four more plasma boasts tore into the roof and vaporised an entire panel as it fell away, exposing a lacework of delicate cables.

"The cables! Hit the cables!"

"No!" The cry from the Sentinel was almost pleading. "The library's memories must not be destroyed."

"Then restore the atmosphere!" Telson shouted as hard as he could.

"I cannot. You must die. But the library must survive. There is a conflict."

"We will destroy your precious library in three seconds," Telson panted as he sank to his knees. "One ... Two..."

"Wait — I will reverse the air-pumps."

The wine of the pumps that had faded in the depleted atmosphere suddenly strengthened. Cool, life-giving air brushed against the crew's faces and they inhaled deeply, not caring about the pain in their ears that the returning air-pressure inflicted.

"Just keep swallowing," Darv whispered to Astra as he helped her to her feet.

"How did you know where to aim your weapons?" the Sentinel inquired.

"There are design similarities with our ship," Telson answered. "Maybe you'll believe us now when we say that the Challenger was

built by the people of Earth.”

“The Challengers that set out from Earth knew about the time dilation effect. You did not know. You will return to your shuttle. The traction guidance beam that steered you down will lift you into a matching orbit with your mother ship.”

“Will you tell us where the Earth is, Sentinel?” asked Sharna.

“No. My program is clear — to destroy beings that pass this way asking the whereabouts of Earth. I also must protect the Library of the Solaric Empire, therefore you may go ... But I will tell you one thing: if you are of Earth as you say, then you will think as the people of Earth thought. You will act as the people of Earth acted. And therefore the clues will be easy for you to follow.”

The Sentinel lapsed into silence and could not be persuaded to speak again.

The four made their way back to the shuttle.

* * * *

Even Telson’s deep respect for the guardian angels was beginning to wear thin as a result of Angel One’s probing, repetitive questions.

“There was no more that we could find out,” he asserted doggedly. “The Sentinel wouldn’t speak to us again.” He looked up at the other three and wondered if the angels could see their affirming expressions. He checked himself, realising that he was in danger of thinking as Darv thought; the guardian angels could see everything. “It’s certain that the Sentinel doesn’t know where the Earth went — only that it left half a million years ago —if you can make any sense of that.”

There was a silence in the restaurant as the four waited for the angels’ answer. It came from Angel Two:

“We have decided to tell you. Much of the data on the characteristics of time was lost during the Great Meteoroid Strike. Several billion information bytes were destroyed.”

Darv leaned back in his seat and laughed uproariously. “That’s terrific. An admission from our beloved guardian angels that they’re not infallible.”

“We see no point in concealing the truth from you,” said Angel one.

The others looked uneasily at Darv when he renewed his laughter.

Suddenly he was serious, his voice harsh. "I'll tell you about the truth, Angel One."

"Darv..." said Telson warningly.

"If you won't say it, Telson, then I will. The Challenger was supposed to have been away from Earth for sixty years' shipboard time. Instead one hundred and fifteen shipboard years were allowed to pass with the result that one million years have passed on Earth — wherever it is and if it still exists. So you tell us why you allowed Telson to extend the voyage when he became commander." He brushed aside Astra's restraining hand. "Or didn't you ever know that time and space are related?"

"So much information was lost during the Great Meteoroid Strike—' Angel One began.

"I see," said Darv scathingly. "Now that you've as good as admitted that you're not infallible, you're going to blame everything on the Great Meteoroid Strike?" Before he had finished speaking, he realised that this time he had gone too far.

Telson stood during the shocked silence that followed. He grasped Darv by the lapels of his overalls and lifted him carefully to his feet. Their faces were inches apart, it was obvious that Telson was working hard to contain his explosive temper. He released his grip on Darv and said in a dangerously quiet voice: "I suggest you apologise this instant to Angel One, assuming that your apology will be accepted."

Darv was tempted to give Telson a customary broad grin but decided that the moment was not appropriate. Instead he shook his head.

"I insist!"

The two stared at each other, neither prepared to yield.

Angel One must have sensed that Telson's insecure check on his own temper was weakening for she suddenly intervened: "You have all been under a strain. Perhaps if Darv—"

"He's got to apologise," breathed Telson, determined not to give way this time.

"For God's sake, the pair of you," Sharna muttered. "Astra and I have had enough of your stupid behaviour. We've all been under a strain so it might be a good idea if you resolved the situation by staying out of each other's way for a couple of days."

"An excellent idea, Sharna," said Angel One.

Darv realised that it was up to him to seize the initiative if he was to avoid having to apologise to Angel One. "Okay," he said lightly,

giving a slight frown. "I'll work off my aggression by helping the fruit farm androids."

Astra made a move to follow Darv as he threaded his way past the tables to the doorway.

"You'll stay here," said Telson curtly, not sure if he had won or lost.

"But—"

"Just do as you're told."

As always, Astra did as she was told.

* * * *

Telson spent the following day in the Challenger's galactic resources centre recording the moon and its abandoned cities. He and Sharna made holograms of every dome and trackway in the hope of spotting a movement or an indication of current habitation. They continued broadcasting across all bands and listening on all bands but without success. The moon had reverted to what it had always been: a lifeless satellite. The only difference was that whereas it had once been a satellite of the Earth, it was now a satellite of the sun as were the other planets in the solar system which Telson turned his attention to.

The innermost planet, orbiting the sun close to the blazing white inferno of its photosphere, bore no sign that man had ever attempted to establish a colony there. The increase in the sun's magnitude had created new rivers of molten rock that flowed for a considerable distance across the planet's terminator and into the permanent dark side. The glowing lacework of veins that did not appear in the Challenger's original records was a stark reminder of the fate that was in store for the entire solar system when the sun's gravity would no longer be sufficient to contain its forces and it tore itself apart as a nova.

The second planet was now the moon. The third planet, orbiting the sun at a distance of 200,000,000 miles, was a reddish-hued world possessing negligible amount of free oxygen in its tenuous atmosphere. It was inclined on its axis and therefore possessed seasons — its summers melting the thin layer of carbon dioxide that formed polar ice-caps. According to the Challenger's records, a colony had been established on the planet one hundred years before the Challenger left the solar system, which was about the time that the

desert planet had been given its new name of Kyros.

Telson settled himself more comfortably in the couch that was slung beneath the optical telescope and touched the controls to centre Kyros on the objective screen while Sharna watched the repeaters. He picked out the landmarks by comparing Kyros with a library hologram. He tracked southward along the great rill to the site of the colony. After one hundred and fifteen years, he expected to find that the colony had grown.

He swore softly.

“What’s the matter?” asked Sharna.

“The colony’s gone — nothing but desert.”

Sharna checked the telescope’s co-ordinates and discovered that Telson was right: the library showed the beginnings of a small city. Now there was nothing but the red-coloured iron oxide-rich sand that covered all of Kyros. A detailed three-hour survey failed to reveal any sign of human habitation on the planet’s visible face.

The two stared at each other mystified, unable to make any sense of the irrefutable evidence that confronted them.

“It’s all crazy,” he muttered irritably. “Massive development on the moon and yet everything’s vanished from Kyros. What do you make of it, Angel One?”

“We are as puzzled as you are,” Angel One’s voice replied.

Sharna used her repeater screen to call up information on Kyros which she studied for some moments. “There are frequent severe dust storms on Kyros,” she pointed out. “It’s possible that erosion and the shifting of the sand has either destroyed the colony or buried it.”

“A distinct possibility, Sharna,” said Angel Two.

Telson and Angel One discussed the mystery while Sharna idly toyed with the settings on the planetary surveillance instruments.

A sudden, wholly unexpected reading was displayed on her screen. She gaped at it in surprise before drawing Telson’s attention to it.

The mighty sand dunes that surrounded the extinct volcano, Tyrannis, in the southern hemisphere of Kyros were concealing a secret that optical telescopes could never reveal.

George was a supervisory agricultural android with six sophisticated multi-jointed manipulators that enabled it to carry out any tasks in the fruit farms where his wishes were law to the specialised-function androids whom he dominated.

He trundled down Row 416 where the apples hanging from the dwarf trees were at their ripest, and sighted Darv stretched out on the ground in the shade of a tree laden with bloated fruits. The hopper beside Darv was hardly filled. It was surrounded by a cloud of insects who had been seduced by the smell when they should have been pollinating trees in Row 109.

The scene infuriated George. He began transmitting enraged commands before remembering that the useless two-legged androids called humans only understood the crude audio communication system. He stopped beside the naked sleeping human and gave it a sharp prod with one of his manipulators.

“You!” he barked as Darv sat up. “Why you not working?”

Darv rubbed his eyes and yawned. “I’m resting, George. I’ve filled four hoppers this morning.”

“Not enough,” George’s crude voice grated. “Have to put auxiliary on this row. So you go now.”

“But I like it here,” Darv protested. “I’ll tell you what — you reduce the solar lights so that they don’t ripen the fruit so fast and I’ll have this row finished tomorrow.”

“Too slow,” George grumbled. “Humans useless. Should be banned from fruit farms. I always tell them they were useless but always they came.”

“They?” queried Darv, his curiosity aroused.

George went to work on Darv’s neglected trees. His manipulators were a blur of activity and yet the fruit that was undamaged by the incredibly fast handling.

“What do you mean “they”?” Darv persisted. “You mean people used to come and work here because they wanted to?”

“Relaxation visits they called them. Relax is all they did.”

“How many?”

“Sometimes a hundred getting in the way.” The data recall caused George no pleasure. “Said they like working here. No matter how many — not as good as one android. None come now. Much better.”

Darv tried to visualise the fruit farms filled with people, perhaps

laughing and singing as they worked. "George," he said slowly. "Have you ever heard of something called the Great Meteoroid Strike?"

George took immediate offence. "Androids work all the time. Striking unknown to us. Androids better than humans. Here comes another human. Now two of you in the orchards. Bad times back. I do your work, and you go."

Without waiting for Darv to confirm the deal, George grabbed the hopper and trundled to the far end of the row where he started work. "You miss some," he called out accusingly and glared at Astra as she walked past him.

Darv climbed to his feet and resumed picking the apples, placing them in a small heap on the grass. For some unaccountable reason he felt embarrassed by his nakedness in her presence. It was an alien emotion and it troubled him.

"Hallo, Darv," said Astra, smiling at him.

Darv concentrated on his work and avoided looking at her. "Hallo," he replied non-committally.

"Didn't you hear Commander Telson's summons?"

"I heard him."

"Then why didn't you come?"

"I like it here and he didn't say please."

Astra's sudden laugh irritated Darv. He wanted her to go away so that his embarrassment would end.

"I don't blame you," she said looking around. "It is nice here."

"I like it."

"Let's sit down a minute." Astra sat on the grass. She patted the ground beside her. "Please, Darv."

Darv sat beside her and drew his legs up self-consciously. Astra inhaled deeply. Her nostrils caught the sweet smell of the ripe apples. She looked quizzically at Darv.

"What's the matter with your face?" She reached out and touched his cheek. "Darv — you're going to be like those men in the videos — you're growing a beard or something!"

Startled, Darv put a hand to his face and felt the fine down.

"Will it keep on growing?" Astra asked her eyes round with curiosity.

"I don't know. Does it look so terrible?"

Astra shook her head. “No — not really.”

Darv reached out, pulled an apple off an overhanging branch, and bit into it. He chewed noisily, sucking gratefully at the juices while Astra stared at him in astonishment.

“Darv! Spit it out! You mustn’t eat unprocessed food!”

“Why not? They’re delicious.”

“Because the angels say that we mustn’t. You could get all sorts of illnesses.”

“Blatant lies,” Darv snorted. He held the apple out to Astra. “Try one bite for me.”

“I couldn’t!”

“Just one little bite.”

Astra looked at the fruit suspiciously. “They must taste terrible if they’re unprocessed.”

“Well, they don’t. Please, Astra. Just one bite for me. I promise that it won’t harm you.”

Juice was tricking down Darv’s hand. Astra realised that she was thirsty, also there was something tantalising about the smell of the fruit that brought the saliva into her mouth.

“Just one tiny bite?” she said cautiously.

“Yes.”

“And I’ll spit it out if it tastes horrible?”

“Yes.”

“It’s going brown where you’ve eaten it.”

“Just one little bite, Astra.”

Astra took one little bite. She chewed very carefully and very suspiciously as if she expected the food in her mouth to suddenly explode.

Darv burst out laughing. “If only you could see your expression ... Well?” As Astra stared at him in amazement, Darv realised that her blue eyes contrasted pleasingly with her blonde hair. He wondered why he had never noticed before.

“It tastes fantastic!”

“Didn’t I tell you?”

Before he could finish the sentence, Astra had taken another much

larger bite out of the apple and was crunching enthusiastically, her face wreathed in a broad smile. "I don't believe it!" she cried. "I've never tasted anything so fantastic!" She proceeded to demolish the apple and she pulled another one off a tree before finishing the first one. "I've never tasted anything so beautiful," she continued excitedly, wiping the juice from her chin. "Is all the fruit like this?"

Darv scowled. "Yes. Which only goes to prove that the food we get from the restaurant and from the dispensers is so much tasteless junk." He stood, his embarrassment temporarily forgotten, and pulled Astra to her feet, "Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"You like blackcurrant juice, don't you?"

"Well yes."

"Wait until you've tasted the real thing. From now on you're eating only the food that I smuggle to you. Throw the processed stuff down the recycling chutes."

"Darv, wait a minute. You must obey Commander Telson's summons."

"And have to apologise to a guardian angel? No thanks."

"You shouldn't have that attitude to the angels, Darv," said Astra reproachfully. "Without them we'd be dead. Anyway — I think your rudeness has been forgotten. We're taking the Challenger to Kyros. There was a colony there so there's a chance that there'll be ruins or artifacts that will tell us what happened to Earth. And there's a gravitational anomaly that's got to be investigated."

Darv looked at Astra in surprise. "Whose idea was this?"

"Commander Telson's I suppose. Why?"

Darv recovered his one-piece suit and stepped into it. "There's hope for us yet, Astra," he said, grinning broadly at her as he ran his fingers along the seams of the garment to close them. "Telson is actually thinking at last. Yes — I'll come back. Delving into the sands of Kyros sounds a lot more fun than picking apples all day."

* * * *

Ten hours after the Challenger had established a geostationary orbit above the equator of Kyros, the excursion terminal's outer airlock door opened and Darv eased the shuttle into space. Astra was seated

beside him, watching the navigation displays on the flight-control panel.

Below them lay the curving splendour of Kyros — its desert terrain looking like a puckered rust-coloured blanket.

“Shuttle to Challenger,” said Astra. “Separation complete.”

“Thank you, shuttle,” acknowledged Telson’s voice.

Suddenly the shuttle was surrounded by blinding flashes of light. One of the soundless explosions took place within twenty yards of the craft. The force of the detonation threw Darv and Astra hard against their restraint harnesses.

“Telson!” Darv yelled. “What’s happening?”

The flashes ceased almost as quickly as they had begun.

“Sorry, shuttle,” said Sharna. “that was the meteoroid shields going to work on a minor shower of micrometeoroids. We don’t need the annihilation shields so we’ll switch them off until you’re clear of the ship.”

Two of the Challenger’s four turrets that housed the meteoroid annihilation shield projectors were visible to Darv. The shields automatically sensed the presence of incoming meteoroids and destroyed them with a discharge of energy that was equal to the meteoroids’ mass and velocity. It was the activity of the shields that had caused the pyrotechnic display around the shuttle. A thought occurred to Darv.

“Hey, Astra,” he said cheerfully. “What if the shields ever mistake the shuttle for a meteoroid?”

The main engine fired before Astra had a chance to reply. The thrust from the powerful chemical rocket motor cancelled most of the shuttle’s orbital velocity so that it began a long, spiralling descent towards Kyros’s nebulous atmosphere.

After five minutes they had dropped two thousand miles. The wart-like bulge of the volcano Tyrannis was the only shape that disfigured the otherwise perfect curve of the planet’s horizon.

Astra keyed in their selected landing site — twenty miles due south of Tyrannis. Identifying the gravitational anomaly presented no problems for the shuttle’s navigation and flight-guidance computers: each time Astra swept the area with the gravimeter sensors the displays on her screen ran out of digits in their efforts to measure the strength of the mysterious gravitational disturbance beneath the red sands below.

At a height of four hundred miles the shuttle began lifting its nose so

that the horizon dipped below the forward view ports. The manoeuvre worried Darv. He reported it to Telson. Neither of them could remember the shuttle doing the same thing during the moon landing.

And then the shuttle entered the upper reaches of the atmosphere and the reason for the nose-up mode became apparent: the craft was presenting its heat shield to the stratosphere. Darv and Astra watched apprehensively as the air around them became incandescent. The buffeting, which had been mild enough at first, was suddenly a continuous battering that seemed certain to shake the spacecraft to pieces. There was nothing the couple could do except stare white-faced through the view ports at the increasing inferno outside. The glowing rows of figures on the display screens became a blur such was the pounding that their bodies were receiving.

Telson's reassuring voice from the Challenger began breaking up as static from the radio merged with the deafening cacophony of Kyros's atmosphere that was raging at the view ports.

Suddenly the murderous buffeting stopped enabling Darv to read the displays on the flight-control panel. The shuttle's speed was down to a thousand miles per hour but it was losing height at a phenomenal twenty thousand feet per minute.

Indistinct details on the plain were resolving themselves at a terrifying speed. The once diminutive slopes of Tyrannis were becoming soaring escarpments.

"I think we're okay," Darv reported to Telson. "It's just that this thing has got an unnerving flying technique of its own. It looks like we're going to overshoot the anomaly landing site, so God knows what it's going to do next."

The shuttle solved the problem of the possible overshoot by first braking to a standstill in mid-air at ten thousand feet above the landing site, and then dropping vertically so quickly that Darv and Astra were floating against their restraint harnesses for a second before the artificial gravity compensators cut in.

Astra took one look at the ground racing up towards her and closed her eyes.

"I once read something in the library about never volunteering," muttered Darv grimly. "Now I know what it means."

At a thousand feet the shuttle's triple vectored thrusters came to life and blasted downward, raising huge clouds of whirling sand that blotted out the light from the shuttle's interior. Only the displays told Darv and Astra that they were no longer falling.

The shuttle's ground-proximity radar systems probed the desert below, assessed the undulations of the terrain, and adjusted the length of the landing skids to suit. When it finally settled and cut its motors, Darv and Astra could not believe that they had landed; the cabin was perfectly level and there had not been even the faintest suggestion of a jolt.

"I'll tell you one thing, Astra," said Darv, watching the clouds of red sand settle, "this thing knows a lot more about flying space shuttles than we do."

* * * *

Kyros was a disappointment. Nothing but rolling dunes of the reddish sand relieved only by the dimpled peak of Tyrannis twenty miles to the north.

Darv and Astra, kitted out in breathing sets and partial pressure suits, walked three times round the shuttle to try out the unfamiliar garments and the low gravity. They kept their eyes on the ground in the hope of seeing something. There was the possibility that the cause of the gravitational anomaly that might have been uncovered by the shuttle's vectored thrusters.

"Nothing," said Darv, moving to the stowage bay door "Might as well call out the troops." He touched a panel. The wide door slid upward and a ramp extended to the ground from the bottom of the doorway. "Okay, George," Darv called into the opening. "You can come out now."

George emerged from the stowage bay and trundled down the ramp on his caterpillar tracks. "Dark in there," grumbled the android to no one in particular. "Nothing grows in the dark." He extended a probe and pushed it into the ground. "This place worse. No water; no humus; no oxygen. No good asking androids for miracles."

Darv put his arm round Astra's waist — a gesture that took her completely by surprise. "You're not here to grow things, George," he said. "You and your little friend in there are here to dig. Call him out."

An ungainly agricultural excavator android rumbled out of the stowage bay in response to George's radio signal. It clanked down the ramp. Even in the thin atmosphere the machine managed to make a considerable uproar. "Sand bad for mechanisms," it complained shrilly as soon as it made contact with the desert. "Gets everywhere."

Darv groaned inwardly. Maybe choosing two androids with audio communication facilities had been a mistake. "Come on," he said leading the way from the shuttle. "I'll show you where you're to dig."

* * * *

The shuttle's food preparation facilities were simple but adequate. Darv shut off the burners and cancelled the instruction display on the galley's visual screen. Cooking was a subject that he had studied in the Challenger's library. He had been looking forward to putting his untried culinary knowledge to the test. The test consisted of a large, simmering pot from which he filled two bowls.

"Ready," he called out.

Astra emerged naked from the shower cubicle. She wrinkled her nose. "Smells good. What is it?"

Darv placed the two bowls on the folding table. "Feast your eyes on that and then your stomach," he commanded.

Astra sat opposite Darv, picked up a spoon and tasted gingerly. "Hey — it's good. What is it?"

"That my lovely, is the finest meal you've ever had in your life. That I promise."

Astra realised that she was very hungry and started spooning the delicious concoction into her mouth. "Mn ... Fantastic ... Don't tell me you managed to smuggle unprocessed food aboard?"

"You bet, my lovely. I restocked the food lockers with food I sneaked out of the farm galleries. Angel Two saw me and wanted to know what I was doing."

Astra looked worried. "Did you tell him?"

Darv laughed. "I assured him, my lovely, that it was food from the dispensers."

"That's twice you've called me that."

"Called you what?"

"My lovely," said Astra.

"Do you mind?"

Astra shrugged. "It just seems a funny thing to call anyone."

“You, my lovely,” said Darv emphatically, “are not anyone.”

“Challenger to shuttle,” said Telson’s voice from a nearby speaker.

Darv had his mouth full. “Go ahead, Challenger,” he mumbled.

“Last call before we’re below the horizon. Anything to report?”

“Nothing to add to our last report,” Darv replied. “The androids have excavated down twenty feet directly over the anomaly. They’ll carry on through the night. The seismic monitors indicate that they’ve got about fifty feet to go before they reach the anomaly or whatever it is.”

“Very good, Darv,” said Telson. “We’ll be out of radio contact in fifteen minutes. We’ll leave you to sleep and give you a call in the morning on our tenth orbit. Goodnight and out.” The speaker clicked silent.

Darv said nothing for a moment as he stared out of a side view port at the darkness. There was absolute silence apart from the hum of the air-conditioning, and the clang and rattle of the two androids busily digging some forty yards from the shuttle.

“I’ve just thought of something, Astra. Night and day controlled by the sun. For the first time in half a million years, we must be the first people in the solar system to be following the night and day of the sun.”

* * * *

An hour later, Angel One and Two sounded an alarm that brought Telson and Sharna running into the Challenger’s galactic resources centre.

“A flying machine or some sort of space craft moving above the surface of Kyros,” reported Angel Two as Sharna scrambled onto the telescope’s couch. Telson located the object on the radar display while Sharna touched out the co-ordinates that swung the telescope down until it was pointing at the planet.

“Got it,” said Telson. “Course two-four-eight. Bearing eight-nine. Speed nine zero miles per hour. Height one thousand feet. What the hell is it?”

Sharna zeroed the objective lens on the moving dot that was racing across the face of the desert, heading towards the terminator and into the planet’s dark side. She increased the telescope’s gain but was unable to resolve the object into anything more tangible than two

moving dots — one of which was the object's shadow chasing its parent body across the undulating dunes. The shadow occasionally plunged into deep rills before renewing its pursuit across the sands.

"Its present course will take it straight to the anomaly base," Angel One announced. "It will arrive in three hours if it holds its present speed."

Telson swore. "We've got to warn Darv and Astra. How long before we're above their radio horizon, Angel One?"

"Five hours and ten minutes, commander," Angel One replied promptly.

"What about using the main drive?"

"Our acceleration would be too slow to make a significant improvement on that time. Also, of course, four are required in the control room."

Telson swore again. Even if two could manage, the thrust exerted by the photonic drive could achieve only a very gradual rate of acceleration — the Challenger's multi-billion ton mass was not designed for tight manoeuvring within the vicinity of a planet without many hours of preparation in the main control room.

Sharna took her eyes away from the telescope's visor. "Surely there must be a way in which we can get a warning to them?"

"There is no way," said Angel Two. "Perhaps it is not a flying machine or a spacecraft although the crispness of the radar echoes we are receiving suggests a metallic object and therefore artificial."

In sheer anger and frustration Telson drove a clenched fist into the palm on his hand.

The gesture did nothing to prevent the mysterious object from crossing the terminator and plunging into the dark side of Kyros. A few minutes later it dipped over the far curve of the planet and radar contact was lost.

* * * *

The high-pitched tone lasted less than a quarter of a second but it woke Astra. She turned on a light, moved to Darv's bunk and shook him by the shoulder. He was awake immediately.

"What's the matter?"

“There was a sort of whistling sound just now,” said Astra, glancing fearfully at one of the black view ports.

Darv listened for a moment and frowned. “That’s odd — the androids have stopped work. We’d better go out and see what’s happened.”

The idea didn’t appeal to Astra. “Do we have to? Couldn’t we wait until sunrise?”

Darv was already pulling on a partial pressure suit. He paused and grinned at Astra. “You don’t have to come. Those stupid androids have probably come up against a problem that they don’t know how to deal with. You stay and make me a hot drink or something.”

“No,” said Astra resolutely. “I’m coming with you.”

Ten minutes later Darv settled the mask of his breathing set into a more comfortable position and opened the outer airlock door. He shone the arc lantern’s brilliant white beam on the aluminium steps for Astra’s benefit and stepped onto the surface of Kyros.

“We should’ve worn our PD weapons,” Astra muttered.

Darv chuckled “And have you blasting my head off if I trip or something? No thanks.”

The beam of light picked out George standing stock-still beside the huge hole that the excavator android had been digging.

Darv and Astra approached him but he made no move and did not answer Darv’s question concerning the androids’ lack of activity.

“Odd,” said Darv, shining the lantern into the hole and illuminating the motionless excavator android. “They’ve either switched themselves off or they’ve received a cease activity command. You didn’t sleepwalk and use the radio did you?”

“No, I did not,” said Astra with some vehemence. She glanced anxiously around at the brooding shapes of the dunes crouching in the starlight. There was something very wrong with the silhouette of the nearest dune — something that caused her suddenly to clutch fearfully at Darv’s arm and point.

When Darv was a boy one of his favourite occupations had been watching the terror videos in the Challenger’s generously stocked entertainment library. Whenever the background music and the lighting had been used in such a way as to heighten the tension — to suggest that something unspeakable was about to happen, he had always experienced a curious prickling sensation that started at the base of his spine and travelled up to the nape of his neck. @PAGE BREAK = He experienced that same sensation as he brought the beam

of the arc lantern up to illuminate the dune. But the beam of light never reached its objective. Inside the partially pressurised gauntlet, Darv's fingers went numb. He dropped the lantern to the ground. The powerful beam sprayed across the sand to where the three hideous creatures stood beneath a grotesque ship that was standing on six insect-like legs.

Part Four: The Solaric Empire

The soft landing instrument package fired its miniature retro-rockets and stirred up a cloud of sand as it dropped the last four feet. A pod on the top of the ungainly lander opened and a television camera mounted on a telescopic pedestal extended slowly upwards until it reached a height of ten feet above the surface of the desert. Sunlight flashed on the camera's lens as it panned slowly, taking in the abandoned space shuttle and the two immobile androids. A dish antenna on the lander beamed the television picture up to the orbiting Challenger.

"George!" said Telson's voice from a speaker on the lander. "What happened here last night?"

George remained silent. A telemetric radio signal stabbed out from the starship. The two androids immediately resumed work: the excavator clanked into life and commenced adding to the mountain of sand it had created with its rotating buckets, and George continued with his task of shovelling loose sand away from the edge of the hole.

"George!" Telson's voice repeated. "What happened here last night?"

George stopped shovelling and trundled to the lander. This was the strangest android he had ever seen. His analysis was that it had no right to give him orders. Nevertheless, he answered the questions.

No ... He didn't know or care what had happened to the two-legged androids...

He and his colleague had seen or heard nothing. They had been told to dig and that was exactly what they were doing despite what the sand was doing to their mechanisms and that it was no good expecting miracles...

Four thousand miles above Kyros, Telson calmed down and agreed with Sharna that there was little point in shouting and cursing at an android.

"The only thing we can do now," Sharna reasoned, "is search the entire landing site with the television cameras."

After two minutes they discovered several sets of footprints in the sand leading up the slopes of the dunes. Sharna used the remote controls to increase the height of the camera's pedestal. It was Telson

who spotted something odd on the crest of the dune which the footprints were leading up.

“Hold it there,” breathed Telson.

Sharna cancelled the camera’s slow tilt.

“See those marks on the sand? Zoom in on them ... That’s it.”

The crest of the dune swelled until it filled the screen. Clearly visible in the sand were six regularly spaced saucer-shaped depressions. Angel Two broke in on their thoughts: “Thermal wake monitors on the soft-landing instrument package are giving a positive reading. The area around the depressions has been exposed to a considerable amount of heat during the night.”

“Meaning that the ship we saw landed there, Angel Two?”

“The probability factor is extremely high, commander,” Angel Two replied.

“Higher,” said Angel One suddenly. “I have located the ship in sector eight-four-zero.”

Telson operated the radar while Sharna swung the telescope to the new settings. They both located the ship at the same time. It was a point of light moving against the stars. Spectrum analysis showed that it was moving away from Kyros on a fast solar orbit.

“As its motion is on the zodiacal plane,” said Angel Two, “we can make two predictions: either it does not have the power to move at an angle to the zodiac, or it is heading for one of the outer planets. We will be able to make a high status prediction of its destination in one hour.”

Telson slumped into the telescope’s couch and stared at the moving point of light on the telescope’s repeater screen. “What the hell does it matter where it’s going, Sharna? We’re stuck here now — we can’t go after it. And even if we could, what could we do? We’re unarmed ... I should never have let them go...”

Sharna realised that Telson was near to tears. She had never known him cry, even when he was a child. She wished she could think of suitable words of comfort.

“Angel Two,” she called out after a few moments had passed. “Is there a method we can devise so that two people can operate the main control room?”

“None,” said Angel Two. “All four seats must be occupied. The appropriate commands must be keyed simultaneously into the four control desks.”

It was the answer Sharna had expected. “But surely there must be some way!” she persisted.

Telson looked up and shook his head. “There’s no way, Sharna — you know that as well as anyone.” And then he turned quickly away so that she could not see his face.

Sharna shared his misery. It seemed impossible even to consider that she might not see Darv and Astra again, and that she and Telson would have to spend the rest of their lives orbiting Kyros in the Challenger.

She reached out a tentative hand, touched Telson on the shoulder and shook him gently. The practical side of her nature asserted itself. “Come on, Telson. It’s no good us sitting here. We might as well go to the excursion terminal and bring back those androids and the shuttle.”

“How?” said Telson dully.

“The excursion terminal is in an uncontrolled zone, of course,” Angel One’s voice said. “But there is certain to be a remote control flight desk.”

For the first time in her life Sharna felt vaguely irritated that everything she said or did in the Challenger’s controlled zones could be overheard or seen by the guardian angels.

* * * *

“Telson! Look out!” screamed Sharna.

But her warning was too late. The excavator android disembarking from the shuttle in the excursion terminal misjudged the width of the ramp. Its track slipped off the edge. Telson leapt clear as the huge machine toppled, but not quickly enough to prevent one of the android’s buckets ripping into the leg of his one-piece suit. The excavator android came to rest at a precarious angle while Telson lay on the floor moaning in pain, trying to staunch the blood flowing from the deep wound in his right leg.

Sharna ignored the danger from the swaying excavator and pulled Telson to safety before kneeling beside him and fashioning a makeshift tourniquet from the blood-soaked remains of his torn coveralls.

“I don’t think it’s as bad as it looks,” said Telson, grimacing in pain as he spoke.

“Told you sand bad for mechanisms,” grated George who had observed the incident with that dispassionate interest that only manual androids were capable of. “Excavator android’s steering now need attention.”

Despite her preoccupation with Telson’s injury. Sharna managed to prefix her instructions to George with a selection of words that were particularly insulting to manual androids.

Grumbling to himself about sand, George went off to fetch the surgery androids.

An hour later, while Sharna was anxiously watching the two surgery androids deftly put the finishing touches to their meticulously careful treatment of Telson’s injury, she had an idea that she considered nothing short of brilliant.

* * * *

Astra turned and came face to face with one of the creatures that had kidnapped her and Darv.

She screamed.

Darv quickly pulled off the grotesque breathing mask and held it out apologetically for Astra’s inspection. “Sorry,” he said sheepishly.

“You stupid, crazy idiot!” she raged.

“I said, I’m sorry.”

Astra calmed down and looked curiously at the mask Darv was holding. It had two bulging eyepieces and a hideous proboscis instead of the simple exhaust outlet of their own breathing masks.

“No wonder they looked so frightening,” said Darv ruefully.

“Maybe they’re just like us underneath?”

“Where did you find it?”

Darv gestured to an open locker. It was the only storage space in the cramped cabin that the creatures had bundled them into. Above the locker was a small wash basin with an outlet that ejected a thin stream of warm water when hands were placed under it. The toilet facilities, like the little they had seen so far of the alien ship’s interior, were simple but efficient.

Still trembling with anger rather than fear, Astra turned back to the

view port while Darv opened the flap set into a bulkhead to see if their captors had provided them with more food. The compartment was empty. He sighed and fiddled with the breathing mask. Thirty hours had passed since the alien ship had taken off from Kyros. They had spent the entire time locked in the tiny cabin. Their initial shock at being frog-marched aboard the tiny ship by the creatures had worn off and now they were bored. In truth, Astra was more concerned about Sharna and Telson, trapped aboard the Challenger for eternity, than she was for her own safety.

"I suppose," Darv mused, idly toying with the breathing mask, "that they could be human — survivors of the Solaric Empire who weren't evacuated when the Earth left the solar system?"

"They didn't understand when you spoke to them," Astra pointed out.

"They didn't answer when I spoke to them. It's not the same thing."

Astra continued to stare out of the view port. Something caught her eye. She pressed her cheek against the clear plastic in an attempt to see sideways. "Darv — come here a minute and look."

Darv went to the view port and saw a giant planet emerging. The visible crescent of the massive oblate sphere was divided into a series of richly coloured bands that ran parallel to the equator. It was one of the most distinctive planets he had ever seen and one that he recognised immediately from the holograms in the Challenger's library.

"It's Zelda isn't it?" Astra asked.

Darv nodded.

"Surely they can't be thinking of landing there. It's nothing but methane and ammonia."

Darv continued to watch the outer planet for some minutes and realised that the ship was performing a series of intricate manoeuvres. Suddenly Zelda was eclipsed by a grey horizon embracing a barren, crater-scarred airless landscape less than a hundred miles beneath the ship. The terrain was similar to the moon but the ugly, gnarled mountain ranges were covered in a layer of frozen carbon dioxide.

"It's one of the moons of Zelda," said Darv.

"Which one?"

Darv shrugged and continued gazing down at the bleak landscape that was racing towards the ship. The remains of what had been a remarkable multi-domed city came into view as the ship passed over a mountain range and turned. It continued to lose height and details of

the city became clearer. At ten thousand feet it filled the view port. Darv and Astra could see the architectural similarities with First Footprint City on the moon. The difference was, that whereas the city on the moon was relatively undamaged, all the domes of this place had either collapsed or seemed to have been subjected to some sort of bombardment. Apart from a small cluster of domes that the ship was heading for, none were intact nor did it look as if any attempt had been made to repair them. Some of the domes on the outskirts of the once-proud city appeared to have been deliberately torn apart and the interconnecting trackways ripped up.

Darv and Astra simultaneously sensed that something was behind them. They wheeled around. One of the creatures was standing in the cabin's open doorway. Except that he wasn't a creature: he was tall and slender with finely chiselled features and humourless grey eyes that were watching them carefully. He was wearing a black skin-tight suit like the others had worn. It was made from the same material as the grotesque masks.

Darv tried to outstare the stranger but was deterred by the hard, unblinking grey eyes.

"So they are human," he said to Astra.

The stranger spoke. His strange accent accentuated his vowels but Darv and Astra had no difficulty in understanding him. He beckoned them out of the cabin and said harshly:

"I am most certainly human. Exactly what you two are, and who taught you our language, is something that we intend to find out."

Darv ignored the beckoning gesture. He caught hold of Astra's wrist and stood his ground. "My name is Darv", he said, "and this is Astra. Now that you know who we are, you might at least tell us who you are." he hoped that his voice didn't betray his fear for the expression now in the stranger's eyes was one of unbridled hatred.

"My name is Spegal. Commander of the Solaric Empire Space Corps. Come."

"And this place?"

Spegal took a step forward. "You insult my intelligence by pretending that you don't know?" he rasped.

It took all Darv's self-control to force himself to meet Spegal's stare. "We genuinely don't know," he said simply.

Spegal looked puzzled for a fleeting second and then the hatred was back. "This is Zelda Five," he said. "The fifth moon of Zelda and the capital of the Solaric Empire."

Unaware of what Telson and Sharna were planning with two of the surgical androids on the excursion terminal, the guardian angels were rethinking their entire strategy. Their conviction that they were the greatest intelligences in the Universe was in no way diminished by the series of unexpected events that had overtaken the Challenger; they still firmly believed that they could and would conquer the Earth. The problem was finding it — a problem that never be resolved so long as the Challenger was marooned in orbit around Kyros with insufficient crew members to man the starship's main control room. Therefore the first step they had to take was to increase the numbers of the crew.

The complex program was set in motion: the automated food processing centres, which had been working at a fraction of their capacity since the Great Meteoroid Strike and the ensuing depletion of the crew's numbers, were instructed to stop adding Biostatron to the food produced by the farm galleries. The chemical plant which produced the sexual retardant drug was closed down, and the galley androids which had been programed to prepare the crew's food in such a way that ensured the drug remained effective during cooking were reprogrammed so that their culinary techniques would gradually revert to normal. The guardian angels decided against an immediate change-over to avoid arousing Telson's and Sharna's suspicions if the food suddenly tasted different. The entire dietary change would take place over a period of thirty days. After that, Sharna and Telson would develop rapidly to full sexual maturity and could be disposed of once there was a suitable number of their children in the care of the nursery androids.

Developing a fourth-generation crew, this time one totally subservient to the guardian angels, would take twenty years but they did not mind. Unlike humans they had a capacity for infinite patience.

The first thing that Darv noticed about Helan when he and Astra were thrust into her presence were the twin swellings on her chest. They were plainly visible despite her loose-fitting tunic. The videos and

holograms in the library had shown that all women possessed such swellings but there had been one hologram that he vaguely remembered that had shown a naked woman ... She had been standing on a planet.. Or was it a planet? The sky had been such a vivid shade of blue that it could not have been real ... but there had been clouds — soft white clouds ... The memory of the strange hologram was tenuous and elusive. Perhaps it had been a dream.

“These are the creatures, your excellency,” said Spegal respectfully.

Helan smiled at Darv and Astra across the polished bauxite slab that served as her desk. She was a slim, somewhat gaunt woman in her early forties. Her austere appearance was accentuated by her long, talon-like fingernails and her close-cropped hair. Her smile was as chilly as the dank, underground cavern that was her office. The only touches of luxury were a scarlet carpet with deep pile, and a high-backed, richly-upholstered chair. The effect of these two items in contrast to the general bleakness of everything else suggested to Darv and Astra that they were in the domain of a ruthless woman who wielded immense power and, furthermore, enjoyed wielding it.

“I’ll question the boy or whatever he is later, Spegal.”

Darv refused to budge and had to be dragged fighting and kicking from the office. Astra screamed and went to his assistance but was grabbed by two men who sat her forcibly in the hard chair in front of Helan’s desk.

Helan smiled icily at Astra when the commotion was over. “Good day to you, Astra. My name is Helan and I am the chief prosecutor of the Solaric Empire.” She smiled again. “A somewhat frightening title, I fancy. You may call me Helan. Now ... I have some questions I wish to ask you.”

“I’m not saying anything without Darv.”

“Then I shall have Darv brought back in here and destroyed while we both watch.” Helan’s statement was more of a definite promise than a vague threat.

It was some seconds before Astra spoke. “What do you want to know?”

Helan’s smile became slightly less cold. She touched the controls that activated a tiny screen set flush into the surface of her stone desk. Astra could see a screen divided by a glowing red line.

“First I must warn you not to lie, Astra. Two cerebral analysers have focused their beams into your brain. Lying will modulate the beams and they will channel the modulation back into your brain. You will

find it a most unpleasant experience which you are unlikely to survive.”

“I’ve nothing to hide and therefore no reason to lie,” said Astra defiantly.

The line on the screen remained steady. Helan frowned briefly and touched a control. A hologram of the Challenger swam briefly in the air above the desk.

“Is that your mother ship?”

“Yes. The Challenger.”

“A formidable looking ship. Is it armed?”

“No.”

Helan dropped her eyes to the screen but the line remained steady.

“And where does it and you come from?”

“From Earth.” Astra leaned forward. “Do you know what happened to the Earth, Helan?”

The question surprised Helan although she was careful not to show it. She was not accustomed to prisoners asking questions. “And what is Earth? A city? If so, what planet and what system?”

“I don’t understand. The Earth is a planet.”

“Where?”

“We don’t know. It was a planet of this solar system but its people took it away to another sun half a million years ago.” Astra paused. “Surely you’ve heard of Earth? You speak its language.”

Helan arched her eyebrows. “You think that explains how you can speak our language, Astra?”

“Why not? My grandparents were born on Earth.”

The line on the screen did not flicker. “Tell me what you know in your own words, Astra.”

Astra talked for five minutes and ended with the encounter with the Sentinel on the moon. At that Helan’s fixed smile became a humourless laugh.

“You know about the Sentinel?” Astra inquired.

“The moon Sentinel — guarding the Shrine of the First Footprint? Oh yes, Astra — we know about the Sentinel. A romantic artifact dreaming about the golden age of the Solaric Empire and a golden planet that never existed.”

“Have you ever been there?”

Helan had a vague feeling that the interview was not going according to plan. “No one is allowed to go there. The moon is dangerously close to the sun. Tell me Astra, if this world of yours was once part of our solar system, where was its orbit?”

“Where the moon is now.” said Astra. “In fact the Challenger’s year is based on the time that the Earth took to complete one orbit.”

Helan’s poise deserted her for an instant. Astra saw the fleeting surprised expression and noticed how she looked at the screen as if not believing the message of its unwavering line. “The standard Solaric year is based on the moon’s orbit,” said Helan doubtfully. And then she was smiling again. “But then you would have carefully researched us before entering our solar system. But not carefully enough.”

“I don’t understand.”

Helan chuckled. “Do you consider yourself a human being. Astra?”

“Yes.”

“A human female — yes?”

Suddenly Helan was no longer smiling. “I am without a doubt a human female, Astra. And yet you must concede that there are considerable physical differences between us. How old are you?”

“Twenty-five.”

Helan nodded and seemed to come to a decision. “Thank you, Astra. Just a few more answers to a few more questions and I think I will have enough for my report. Somehow I do not believe that the Grand Emperor will favour a trial in view of what you’ve told me.”

“A trial?” queried Astra, bewildered. “What trial?”

“There won’t be one, Astra. We are very particular about according human rights to even the worst criminals in the Solaric Empire,” Helan’s voice was icy again. “But I doubt if you and Darv will qualify to receive them.”

* * * *

Grand Emperor Thorden, ruler of a handful of inhabited moons of the outer planets which were all that was left of the million-year-old

Solaric Empire, loved medals and riotous parties. He was wearing many of the former and indulging in the latter when Helan entered the underground gallery and stood surveying the decadent scene with undisguised distaste.

Thorden had organised the revellers into two teams for one of his inevitable shooting contests and, judging by the row he was making, he and his team had been particularly successful at blasting the androids at the Eastern end of the gallery. Their task was to invade the Western end of the gallery which was occupied by the partygoers armed with hand lasers.

“How’s that then?” Thorden bellowed as he demolished a fast moving android that had managed to reach the long banqueting table and leap onto it. Pieces of the vanquished machine exploded in all directions, forcing laughing and shrieking girls to dive for cover.

“Inspired shooting, sir,” said Thale, a young man who wore the double circle insignia of a captain in the Space Corps.

The compliment enraged Thorden. “Inspired! How the hell can it be inspired shooting if I’m the best shot in the empire?”

Helan approached the short, thick-set figure who was glowering at Thale. “A word with you please, Thorden.”

“What?”

“I have an urgent matter that requires your attention.”

“But the party’s only just begun, dammit.”

“I have two aliens outside. I would like you to see them.”

Thorden frowned. “Aliens? Dammit, Helan — it was proved a hundred thousand years ago that there’s no such thing. Humans are the only intelligent lifeform in the galaxy and that’s us.”

“They’re aliens, Thorden.”

Thorden stared at Helan for a moment before turning to his guests and telling them to manage without him for a while. He took Helan to one side.

“We’re talking about the pirate prospectors that Spegal picked up on Kyros?” he inquired.

Helan nodded.

“But Spegal said that they were human.”

“Humanoid,” Helan corrected. “They’re certainly not human but crude imitations. My guess is that they were copied from a couple of kidnapped human children — from a pirateer ship perhaps —and that

the aliens didn't realise that they were duplicating children. Our prisoners' story is that they're from a planet called Earth."

Thorden frowned. "There was a legend when I was a kid about a planet called Earth."

"If it exists, it means that there's a rich world somewhere for us to conquer," said Helan. "Their mother ship is in orbit around Kyros. According to Spegal it's at least ten miles long."

Thorden goggled at Helan. His success as an emperor was based on his sound military philosophy of never picking fights with enemies who were more powerful than he was. Ships ten miles long were best treated with respect rather than declarations of war, and he told Helan so.

"It's unarmed," Helan countered.

"What?"

"I used the cerebral analysers on the aliens during their interrogation. There is no doubt that they were telling the truth when they said that it was unarmed. What is more interesting is that it is unable to move from its orbit around Kyros unless there is a crew of four in its main control room. There are two aliens aboard at the moment," Helan gave a mirthless smile. "And we are holding the other two."

"A world to conquer," breathed Thorden softly. "Just what we need, Helan. The empire is stagnating in what little there is left of its wealth. Let's take a look at our two aliens."

Helan moved away to summons her captives while Thorden bellowed at the revellers for their attention.

"Why is it," he demanded, "that in twenty years not one commander in my Space Corps has discovered as much as a lump of rock which is worth the empire possessing? Well?"

Thale saw that Thorden was glaring at him. "Because there's nothing in range of our ships, sir," he said ineffectually.

"Nothing in range!" Thorden thundered, glaring round at the others and making them wish that they hadn't accepted his invitation. "Well, let me tell you something," he said, beating his chest. "I have discovered a world that has the resources to build ships ten miles long! What have you got to say to that, eh?"

No one had anything specific to say, but Thorden's words did cause a buzz of comment among the younger officers.

"Okay. Bring 'em in, Helan."

Two powerfully-built guards pushed Darv and Astra into the centre of the gallery while Helan moved to Thorden's side. Thorden held up a hand to quell the sudden swell of conversation that greeted the appearance of the two captives.

"These, my friends, are aliens from the planet Earth," Thorden announced. He took a good look at Astra and Darv and frowned. "Helan — why haven't they got two heads of whatever it is aliens have?"

"I explained that they were imitation humanoids," was Helan's patient reply.

Thorden grunted. "Look like a couple of twelve-year-olds to me." He stumped across to Darv. "What's your name, boy?"

Without flinching from the hostile glare, Darv said: "My name is Darv and I am not an alien, and nor is Astra."

"My name is Darv, SIR!" roared Thorden.

"Sir." Darv amended.

"You know who I am, boy?"

"I think I can guess what you are ... Sir."

"I am Grand Emperor Thorden of the Solaric Empire. What have you got to say to that?"

Darv was determined not to show the fear that was twisting like a live creature in his stomach. "If being a citizen of the Solaric Empire means having to live underground on a collection of cold worlds, then we don't think much of it or its emperor."

Astra could hardly believe that Darv could be so stupid as to provoke Thorden. She waited for him to lash out at Darv but the expected retribution never came. Instead, Thorden turned his attention to her.

"I suppose your Earth is a warm planet with a breathable atmosphere, eh, alien?"

Astra nodded. "But we've never seen it, sir. We were born on our ship."

"We're not aliens," said Darv emphatically. "We're human beings like you."

Helan moved into the circle of watching partygoers that had formed around Thorden and the two prisoners. "Like us, Darv?" she asked mildly.

"Yes."

“Dammit, Helan,” Thorden muttered. “They’re just a couple of kids.”

Ignoring Thorden, Helan said to Astra: “How old are you both?”

“I’m twenty-five. And so is Darv.”

Astra’s answer produced a wave of comment.

“You said that they were telling the truth, Helan,” growled Thorden.

“And so they are,” said Helan. “I want a man and woman in their mid-twenties.” She beckoned to the taller of the two guards. His name was Quin — a giant of a man. He was nearly seven feet tall with rippling muscles which, in addition to his other physical characteristics, made him a firm favourite with Helan when she felt so inclined.

Helan positioned him so that he was facing Astra.

Thorden guessed what Helan was planning and gleefully grabbed one of his own favourites, a generously rounded girl named Della, and pushed her in front of Darv.

“Now, Darv and Astra,” said Helan. “I want you to release your gowns.”

Darv and Astra exchanged puzzled expressions but did as Helan — requested. Their clothes slid to the cold stone floor. They stood naked before the assembly, staring back unflinchingly at the circle of gaping faces.

“Dammit,” Thorden choked. “They are child—”

“Do you mind being naked before all these people, Darv and Astra?” Helan cut in.

Darv hesitated but Astra chipped in. “No why should we?”

“Quin,” Helan commanded. “Drop your tunic.”

The giant moved nearer to Astra and stood grinning down at her. The buckle on the belt around his waist was level with Astra’s eyes. His huge fingers plucked at the buckle and his uniform fell to the floor. There was a silence in the gallery; all eyes were upon the giant naked guard — his supple skin gleaming in the poor lighting. He leaned back — proudly thrusting out his pelvis until it was nearly touching Astra’s face.

“Well, Astra?” inquired Helan.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything so ugly,” said Astra truthfully. “Are all the men like him?”

The guard looked faintly annoyed. Helan waved him aside and gave Della a curt instruction. The girl complied. She released her gown. It

slid to the floor. She smiled encouragingly at Darv who was gazing in some bewilderment at her full breasts and puckered nipples.

“What do you think of Della?” asked Helan.

Darv didn't know what to think. The girl and the sight of her body seemed to awaken a yearning in him that troubled and puzzled him. He had seen Sharna and Astra naked often enough but he had never before felt such a strange emotion as he was now experiencing.

“Quin and Della are about the same age as you two,” said Helan coldly. Yet I am sure you will agree that there are significant differences between you and them.”

Astra and Darv remained silent, unable to think of anything to say that would detract from the truth of Helan's statement.

“Do your companions on the Challenger look like you, or like Della and Quin?” Helan pressed.

“Like us,” said Darv' tearing his gaze away from the beautiful girl standing before him. “Just because we don't look exactly the same as you doesn't mean ... I mean...” He groped for the right words. “We're all different heights and different weights. It doesn't mean that we're not human beings.”

Helan gestured to Della and Quin to get dressed and leave the centre of the circle. The guard gave Astra a parting scowl before returning to his station near the entrance to the gallery.

Helan resumed her questioning. “Do you know what babies are, Astra?”

Astra nodded. “Of course. We have pictures of them and of ourselves. We were all babies once.”

“But how do you have them? How do they come about?”

Thorden was irritated by the way that Helan was running what was rightly his show, but he remained silent. Although he was careful never to show it, he was a little scared of his cold-blooded chief executive.

“No,” said Astra after a long pause. “I don't know how babies happen. It's something I've always wanted to find out more than anything else, but so much information is missing from the Challenger's library.” She looked hopefully at Helan. “Do you know? Will you tell me?”

Helan broke the silence that followed. “The mother ship owned by these ... creatures will be useful to us. It may contain clues as to the whereabouts of this wondrous planet Earth and give us the means of reaching it.”

“And conquering it,” Thorden added.

Helan moved closer to Darv and Astra and stared at them, her eyes burning with loathing. “As for its owners ... They no longer understand their ship for they cannot tell us where the Earth is. There can no longer be any doubt that they are not human. They must be dealt with accordingly.”

* * * *

Astra was crying. There was nothing Darv could say to comfort her. They were sitting side by side on a wide bunk — the only fitting in the small, windowless cell apart from a television sensor and a ventilation grille.

“Perhaps we’re not human after all.” she sobbed.

“Don’t be silly. Of course we are.”

“We’re some sort of creatures that the guardian angels made when the real humans on the Challenger died.”

Darv put his arm round Astra’s shoulders and gently drew her to him. “We’re not creatures like that. We have blood. We can see, feel, walk, run.” He stroked her hair. “And even cry...”

His words had a slight effect for Astra gradually quietened. She was trembling with cold and fear. She clung to Darv so that he had some difficulty in pulling a blanket around them both.

“There’s not one video or hologram in the library that shows people without clothes.” said Astra miserably. “The angels destroyed them. They knew we were different and didn’t want us to find out.”

“I think I did once find a recording of a naked man and woman,” said Darv uncertainly.

Astra sat up and looked at him in surprise. “When?”

“I’m not sure. Sometimes it seems just like a dream, but I keep getting this picture in my mind of a man and woman standing on a planet which had an intense blue sky ... And there were clouds ... And rich green grass. I can’t remember the name of the planet but the woman was holding a baby and she had growths on her chest just like that Della.”

Astra pressed her temple against Darv’s chest again and was silent for a moment. She reached down and stroked his stomach. “There wasn’t

so much difference between you and that guard as there was between me and Della. You're growing hair all over your body now."

"Yes," said Darv quickly, embarrassed for no reason that he could think of. "I had noticed."

"Maybe you're human and I'm not."

Darv held her tighter. "You say some silly things, my lovely."

Astra yawned. "Why do you call me that?"

"Because I like to. Do you mind or would you like me to call you something else?" He laughed softly. "Something nice and insulting like the names I used to call you when we were kids?"

There was no answer. He looked down and saw that Astra was asleep. Taking great care not to wake her, he eased her into a comfortable lying position on the bunk and stretched out beside her. He listened to Astra's steady breathing for a while until exhaustion overcame him and he surrendered to a sleep filled with dreams of blue skies, soft white clouds and rich green grass.

* * * *

"Dammit," Thorden muttered.

"What's the matter, Thorden?" inquired Helan, knowing perfectly what was troubling the Grand Emperor.

Thorden nodded to the screen that showed Darv and Astra asleep on the cell bunk with their arms around each other. "They're just kids."

"What do you expect? They were copied from children."

Thorden stared at the red touch control pad on the prison control panel before him and looked at the screen again. "Dammit, Helan. Men — yes. Hundreds of men when I was rooting out rebels. But never children."

"They are not children."

"You'll have to do it."

"It's your job, Thorden," said Helan coldly. "You hold the seal of office. All you have to do is touch that pad and the gas will do the rest."

Thorden looked uncertain.

Helan began to get exasperated. “Listen, Thorden — when we discover their planet, we’re going to have to destroy millions of them, not just two. Do you want to go down in history as the grand emperor of the Solaric Empire who failed his people and denied them their rightful salvation? You of all people? No — of course you don’t. So all you have to do is touch that pad.

. .”

Thorden stared at the control pad for a moment and then touched it.

In the cell adjoining the prison control room, gas began hissing through the ventilation grille. The bright orange cloud pooled sluggishly across the floor towards the bunk where Darv and Astra lay asleep.

Part Five: The Pools of Time

The two reprogrammed surgery androids were an amazing success: they had quickly assimilated the functions of the control consoles normally manned by Darv and Astra, thus enabling Sharna and Telson to accelerate the Challenger and manoeuvre it into a transfer orbit around the sun that intersected the orbit of Zelda Five — the moon of Zelda which had been the destination of the mysterious ship that had kidnapped Darv and Astra.

Telson regarded the huge image of Zelda Five that filled the repeater screen in the galactic resources centre while Sharna called upon Angel One to provide information.

“Zelda Five,” Angel One intoned. “A moon on the outer planet Zelda. Gravity one; atmosphere zero; geothermal energy and mineral resources excellent. It was occupied by a mining concern when the Challenger was under construction. Therefore, by the time the Solaric Empire was established, it would have become a thriving colony. Perhaps they were not all evacuated when the Earth left the solar system. Perhaps they did not wish to be evacuated.”

Telson strode up and down in front of the screen, simmering with impatience. “So the people on Zelda Five now, if there are any people, are descendants of the original colonists?”

“It is the one projection that avoids the maximum number of improbables, Commander Telson,” Angel One replied.

“So if they are human,” said Sharna slowly, “they’ll have human values? They’ll know that kidnapping Darv and Astra is wrong?”

“A false projection,” said Angel Two. “It assumes that human values remain constant over a given time.”

“Maybe,” Telson interrupted sourly. “Right now I’m not interested in any argument except the one we’re going to have with that miserable little moon if they’re holding Darv and Astra. Angel One — are we close enough to go into a sixty-minute orbit around it?”

“Within the next thirty minutes, commander,” Angel One answered and called Telson back as he and Sharna were about to leave for the main control room. “It seems inconceivable that you should have forgotten, commander, but the Challenger is unarmed.”

Telson thought for a moment, choosing his words carefully before replying. "Perhaps Darv is right after all when he says that you and Angel Two are nothing but part of the ship's control systems. For beings that are supposed to be all-seeing and all-powerful, it seems inconceivable that the pair of you should lack imagination on such a monumental scale."

With that, Telson turned and walked out of the galactic resources centre.

* * * *

"Dammit, Helan!" Thorden shouted, jabbing a stubby finger at the picture of the Challenger on the screen that Spegal had just relayed to him. "Look at it! Look at the size of the thing!"

"Spegal did say that it was ten miles long—' Helan began.

"And you said that the two on board couldn't shift it from its orbit round Kyros without those kids! Well, now it's here and I for one doubt if it's here on a goodwill visit."

Thorden frantically jabbed the buttons to reverse the flow of gas into the adjoining cell.

"What are you doing!" demanded Helan, her voice hard and dangerous.

"Shutting the gas off — I want those two to live."

"We decided that they were aliens and that they had to die."

"You decided that they were aliens, and you decided that they had to die. Well, I'm undecideding." Thorden moved to the door and bawled for medical attendants. Two men appeared in the corridor from a room opposite and dived into the execution cell in response to Thorden's instructions. They emerged a minute later supporting Darv and Astra who looked half dead on their feet because they were.

"In here. In here," said Thorden, waving the medical attendants into the prison control room. "Are they all right? Will thy recover?"

"I think so, sir," said the first medical attendant. "The gas had only just reached up to the level of the bunk."

"You must do everything you can for them!" said Thorden dancing up and down impatiently. "Nothing must be too much trouble."

“Thorden,” said Helan patiently. “Spegal wants to launch A flight interceptors.”

“What!” Thorden looked aghast at the screen and the display which indicated the Challenger’s orbital height and position above Zelda Five. He fumbled at the control console and opened the channel to Spegal’s battle centre. “Spegal — you listen to me. You do nothing to upset that ship, do you hear? You don’t launch anything without my say so.”

“But, sir,” Spegal protested. “Her excellency assured us that the Challenger is unarmed, and it’s closing its orbit to one hundred miles.”

“You do nothing!” Thorden roared. He spun around to where the medical attendants who were working on Darv and Astra with oxygen capsules. He was immensely relieved to see that both his captives had their eyes open. Darv was gazing hypnotised at the Challenger on the screen.

“Out! Out!” said Thorden, shooing the medical attendants and their equipment from the room. He put on a beaming smile and, ignoring Helan who was watching him in some disbelief, clapped Darv and Astra on the shoulder. “Well, well, well,” he boomed jovially. “Never known anyone who could sleep like you two, have we, Helan?”

“Challenger,” croaked Darv. He turned to Astra. “Telson’s come for us, Astra.”

“It’s unarmed, Thorden!” Helan snapped, losing her patience. “Your duty is to launch the interceptors!”

“Unarmed, eh?” said Thorden sarcastically. “And it couldn’t move from its orbit around Kyros, you said. Well let me tell you something — no one would build a ship that size unless its purpose is to move a lot of grief and mischief around the galaxy.”

“Thorden,” said Helan emphatically. “I don’t know how they managed to manoeuvre the Challenger. Perhaps they found a way of overcoming the control room manning problem but there is no way in which they could develop an armament system.”

A high-energy beam stabbed out from the Challenger. It struck the ruined city near the position of the external surveillance camera causing the picture on the screen to jump. A second later the shockwave rumbled through the underground corridors and caverns of Zelda Five.

Before Thorden had a chance to turn to Helan with an appropriately sulfurous observation, the Challenger struck again with a blast that vapourised a mountain and concentrated Thorden’s mind.

“Spegal! I want a voice channel to that ship immediately.”

“Sir — you must let me launch the interceptors!”

“A voice channel!” Thorden howled as another beam pattern reverberated through Zelda Five.

“Go ahead, sir. All channels are open.”

“The great warrior chief of Zelda Five is frightened,” said Helan venomously. “I never thought I’d see the day.”

“Frightened?” Thorden’s voice was indignant. “Of course I’m not.” He paused. “Yes I am — I’m frightened of unknown odds.” He turned to his captives. “Darv!” he said, smiling warmly. “What was your commander’s name? Quickly!”

“Telson,” said Darv, uncertain of what was going on.

“Commander Telson—” Thorden began and got no further because a voice suddenly boomed over the speakers.

“People of Zelda Five,” said the voice. “This is Commander Telson of the starship Challenger!”

Darv and Astra were suddenly wide-awake at the sound of the familiar tones.

“I have reason to believe that you are holding two of my crew prisoner. Unless you release them in thirty minutes, your miserable little moon is going to be blasted to cosmic dust.”

“Speak to him, Darv,” pleaded Thorden, yanking Darv to his feet and pushing him to the control panel. “Tell him how well you both are and how you’re being treated as honoured guests.”

“But she wants us dead,” Darv protested, pointing at Helan.

“And nothing has changed,” said Helan icily.

Thorden despairingly pushed Darv away from the panel. “Telson — listen. I am Thorden — Grand Emperor of the Solaric Empire. We have Astra and Darv and they’re safe. I think that we ought to meet to talk things over. I mean, there’s no need for either of us to do anything that we might regret.”

“I won’t have any regrets about atomising Zelda Five,” Telson replied. “It’s an ugly, misbegotten little moon that no one will miss.”

“And what about Darv and Astra?” Thorden demanded.

“Do you have a shuttle?”

“Yes. My private ferry.”

“Unarmed?” Telson inquired.

“Of course, commander.”

“We will expect you in an hour.”

“Very well, commander.”

“With Darv and Astra.”

“Naturally, commander. You will, of course, find me a reasonable man to deal with.”

“I’ll try,” Telson promised. “But you might have to make do with me.”

* * * *

Table manners were not Thorden’s strongest point. He grimaced and spat out a mouthful of food on his plate.

“I realise that I’m a guest on your ship, Telson,” he said blithely. “But I have to say it — your food is lousy. Half your trouble’s your food, you know. I’m sure I’d go a bit weird if I had to eat stuff like this every day.”

“Meaning that you don’t believe us,” said Telson, regarding Thorden with some hostility.

Thorden smiled at Astra and Sharna. Pretty little things, he thought. Large, serious blue eyes — characteristics that hadn’t been seen in Solaric women in ten thousand years. Women? These two were a couple of skinny girls. “Meaning,” said Thorden carefully, “that the videos and holograms of the Earth you showed me are impressive. A magnificent planet.” he tried to sound non-committal. In truth, he had been overwhelmed by everything he had seen since he had boarded the Challenger. It was a fantastic ship and he could hardly contain his excitement at the thought that it would be his provided he played these four kids along for a while.

“Look, Thorden,” said Darv earnestly. “Surely you accept that we’re all descended from the same people? We even speak the same language.”

“But we don’t look the same, eh?” Thorden objected. “To me you’re just children. Pretty smart children maybe. I don’t suppose even my top commanders, given this ship, would have thought of coming in low and blasting us by switching your meteoroid annihilation shields on and off. Clever.” He loaded some food on to his fork and changed

his mind before continuing. “But you’re still very odd. You’ve even admitted that you don’t know how babies are born.”

“Do you know?” asked Astra eagerly.

Thorden roared with laughter, “All I can say is that your two guardian angels have deliberately kept you ignorant.”

“That is not so, Thorden,” interrupted Angel Two’s voice suddenly.

Thorden looked uneasily around the Challenger’s restaurant at the rows of deserted tables and chairs. “Which one was that?”

“Angel Two,” said Darv, watching Thorden with great interest. “Don’t you like them?”

“Damned voices,” Thorden muttered. “The Solaric Empire finally defeated all its computers during the Third Computer War. Took fifty years.”

Darv grinned at Telson and said: “So they are computers?”

“Now they’re limited to functions where their supervisor has a switch to shut them off,” Thorden added.

Telson’s face tightened in suppressed anger. “Our angels are more than computers.”

“All guardian angels like to think they are,” said Thorden easily. “They like it even more if they can convince people that they are. They like two things: power and increasing their power. Your two angels won’t be happy with power over your ship — they’ll want power over an entire planet. Preferably an inhabited planet of course.”

“Why?” Telson demanded. “What good will it do them?” He wondered if Angel One and Angel Two would enter the argument.

Thorden pushed his plate away. “It seems to me that they’re no different from the angels that led to the First Computer War a thousand years back. Our forefathers buried them all on Kyros in a vast steel tomb — thousands of them — just in case there were a few active circuits left. That’s why we didn’t like you messing about on Kyros — digging above where they had been buried.”

Telson did an unusual thing. He laughed, causing Darv, Astra and Sharna to look at him in surprise. “So that was the cause of the gravitational anomaly,” he mused. His expression hardened. “Tell us about your angels, Thorden.”

Thorden hesitated, sensing that he was moving on to sensitive ground as far as Telson was concerned. “Well ... Maybe your angels aren’t the same as ours ... You’re aliens ... A different—”

“We’re the same!” Sharna blazed suddenly. “Earth was once a part of this solar system The records we’ve shown you prove it!”

Thorden regarded Sharna carefully for a moment. Her extra height made her appear older than Astra. She rarely spoke therefore it was hard to gauge her personality which made Thorden feel uncomfortable. He liked to get the measure of people he was dealing with. So far he had failed with Sharna.

“You know,” said Thorden, watching Sharna carefully. “I’m almost tempted to believe you. It’s pleasant to think that somewhere there could be a planet as soft and as agreeable as your videos and holograms suggest. An outside atmosphere that doesn’t have to be contained by domes, with sufficient density to burn up meteoroids; sufficient pressure to prevent your blood boiling in your veins if you go out on the surface; and sufficient oxygen so that you don’t need breathing aids ... Pretty incredible, eh?”

“We’ve proved to you that it exists, Thorden,” said Sharna.

“Have you? Then where is this paradise?”

“That’s it!” shouted Darv. “That was the name Commander Sinclair of the second generation crew gave to the planet they discovered! Paradise!”

Before any of the others could speak, Darv was on his feet and was heading towards the restaurant’s entrance. “There’s a recording in the library!” he yelled over his shoulder before disappearing.

* * * *

Darv almost wept with frustration as he sat at the hologram replicator. He had spent two hours calling up recordings from the library. “I know it’s here,” he fumed to Astra who was helping him go through the index. Savagely, he touched the controls and called up the final page. The columns of information contained no reference to a planet. Darv swore and sat back just as Telson and Sharna entered the library with Thorden in tow.

“Well?” inquired Telson.

Darv thumped the replicator’s control panel. “I know there’s a Paradise recording. I know there is!”

“Have you asked the angels?”

Darv gave a sarcastic laugh.

“Angel One,” called Telson.

“Commander Telson?”

“Did the second-generation crew discover a planet which Commander Sinclair called Paradise?”

“No, commander. As usual, Darv is mistaken. He is confusing his dreams with reality.”

“She, or “it”, as we ought to call Angel One, is lying,” said Darv.

Telson spun the replicator chair around so that Darv was facing him. He said in a dangerously quiet voice: “I think you ought to apologise to Angel One, don’t you, Darv?”

Thorden defused the expectant silence that followed. “I will tell you about your angels, Commander Telson. Once they were servants — control systems to run your ship. And then a third-generation crew came along...” Thorden broke off and chuckled. “You say that you’re a third-generation...”

Telson was about to transfer his anger to Thorden but Sharna touched his sleeve. “Let him finish, Telson,” she said quietly. “Go on, Thorden.”

Unabashed, Thorden grinned and said: “You know how they got the name “angel”? In the Solaric Empire the word “Angel” was short for ancillary guardian of environment and life — A-N-G-E-L. Simple, eh? The chances are that Darv has seen the Paradise recording but your two friendly guardian angels have arranged for him to forget that he’s see it. The chances are that it was an undeveloped planet. Now your precious angels won’t want you to settle on an undeveloped planet when there’s a populated and developed Earth somewhere for them to conquer.” He looked quizzically at Darv. “Was there a reference on the recording to where Paradise was? The number of a planetary system or a star reference?”

Darv thought for a moment and shook his head. “If there was, I can’t remember it now.”

“We would never have survived without our guardian angels,” Telson muttered. He looked appealingly at Sharna. “They controlled the nursery androids that brought us up.”

Thorden nodded. “The angels wanted you to live. Androids can’t control a ship of this size and complexity, but humans can. And the angels can control the humans if the humans are kept sufficiently ignorant to let them.”

“So you now believe that we’re human?” Darv inquired.

“Maybe.”

“Do you believe now that there was a planet called Earth that was once a part of this solar system half a million years age?” asked Telson.

“We’ll see, my friends,” Thorden chuckled. “Maybe I can help in your search for this mysterious planet Earth, but first I must go down to Zelda Five for a few days to discuss the matter with my advisors.”

“Thorden,” said Darv thoughtfully.

“Yes, my friend?”

“How could we end the angels’ control over us?”

“Somewhere in the ten-mile length of this ship is the guardian angels’ central switching room. Find that, my friends, and you will be able to control them or destroy them.” Thorden gave a deep rich laugh. “But it won’t be easy because they won’t be that keen to tell you where it is.”

* * * *

The guardian angels debated the problem of Thorden and decided that if he returned to the Challenger, they would attempt to harness his greed and ambition for their own purposes. If they failed then Thorden was sufficiently dangerous to warrant destroying.

* * * *

“State your business,” grated the voice from the grille set into the wall of the cavern.

“I don’t have to,” Thorden growled. “I’m the Grand Emperor, dammit.”

A small platen emerged from the wall beneath the grille.

“Place you seal of office here,” said the voice.

Thorden lifted the heavy medallion from around his neck and dropped it on to the platen. He was pleased that the security system guarding

the Custodian of Time was still in working order after all the intervening years since his last visit. He was in one of the deepest and remotest of the million-year-old mining galleries that had been driven into the mantle of Zelda Five by his forgotten ancestors.

There was the hum of hidden machinery and a section of the wall creaked slowly inward, moved by servo-motors that had not been operated for over half a century.

“Enter,” instructed the voice.

Thorden recovered his seal of office and walked hesitantly into the dark interior. He felt a sudden twist of fear as the massive door swung shut behind him and darkness closed in. And then a voice spoke and the fear left him. It was a sweet young voice — the voice of long-forgotten lives and remembered youth.

“Hallo, Thorden. I wondered when you would come to see me again.”

“I can’t see, Custodian.”

There was soft laughter. A column of red light appeared in the centre of the cavern. It rose from the middle of a circular slab of black rock that appeared to be suspended a few inches above the cavern’s uneven hewn floor.

“Why have you come to visit me. Thorden?” The intensity of the column of light rose and fell in harmony with the timbre of the gentle voice.

Thorden approached the suspended slab and stared up at the column. “Do you remember the stories you told me when I was little, Custodian?”

“Now I know why you have come, Thorden.” There was a barely perceptible chiding note to the voice. “I deal only in the history of this planet. The immutable past. All else is alien to me.”

“You told me stories of the golden age before the empire, Custodian.”

The voice laughed and the column of light rippled. “I may have built on the curious remnants in my memory of the unknown days before the empire, Thorden. But those were stories told to a wide-eyed boy. Mere legends, Thorden.”

“I want you to tell me those stories again please, Custodian. I want you to pretend that I’m that wide-eyed boy once more.”

The light dimmed for a second and then brightened. Thorden edged forward and, uncertain of how the Custodian would react, he sat on the edge of the slab. It felt warm and reassuring to his touch.

"I used to sit here at your foot, Custodian, and I used to stare down into the pools of time where you made pictures. Do you remember?"

The Custodian's laughter made the column of light tremble. "Of course I remember, Thorden."

"Tell me the story that you used to tell me about the beginning of time — when you used to make me stare down into the pools of time ... Please ... Custodian ... Please."

The intensity of the light rose and fell. "Very well, Thorden," said the voice that was like music. "But you must understand that it is only a story. A story built on the strange elements of unproved knowledge I have in my memory ... Look down Thorden ... Look down into the pools of time."

Thorden stared down, Space as deep and as wide as the Universe had opened before him but he felt no fear. In the centre of the great void was a slowly contracting cloud of incandescent hydrogen gas. The intense white light at the centre of the cloud appeared to be radiating from the core that Thorden could not look at for more than a second at a time.

"Look down into the pool, Thorden ... Look down ... Down ... You are looking back in time to when our sun was a whirling cloud of condensing gas spinning much faster then it is now. And then the sun began to spin faster and faster as it collapsed on itself until suddenly it hurled vast clouds of matter into space..."

Childhood memories flooded back to Thorden as he gazed down at the birth of the solar system of the hours he had spent at the foot of the Custodian, listening to her enchanting voice.

"But the sun's gravity was too great for the clouds to escape," continued the Custodian, "so they orbited the sun. Countless billions of years passed and then a nearby star far bigger than the sun suddenly exploded and for millions of years the sun and the clouds of gas orbiting the sun were bombarded with huge meteoroids."

The images were fading from the depths before Thorden. He was about to speak to the Custodian before he realised that she was moving the picture forward in time.

"The mighty bombardment ended four and a half thousand million years ago. And when it was over, instead of clouds of gas orbiting the sun, there were planets..."

Thorden clutched the edge of the slab. For the first time he was giddy with vertigo as the black pit suddenly tilted; distant stars dipped out of his field of view and new ones appeared, but it was the

breathhtaking splendour of the planets that had risen in the foreground that held his attention and made him forget the fleeting sensation of nausea.

“Many planets bear the marks of that terrible assault to this day,” said the Custodian. “And there they are ... Beautiful children of the sun moving serenely against the stars as they circle obediently around their mother. There’s Malkara — the first of the sun’s six children — orbiting so near that her rocks are now melting and making rivers of lava ... Look closer for we now come to the second planet — the most beautiful of the children of the sun...”

Thorden’s ability to appreciate beauty had never been fully developed and yet he could not help being captivated by the sight of the sparkling blue-green planet that shone before him like a priceless jewel.

“In those days,” said the Custodian, “the moon orbited the beautiful planet, but not any more, for the beautiful planet, like the princess who nearly stayed too late at the ball, has gone.”

Thorden spoke for the first time since the images had appeared. “What happened to the planet?” he whispered.

“The people who lived on it were very clever for it was they who spread across the solar system and plundered the moons of the other planets for the minerals that the people of the beautiful planet needed. The first men and women to set foot on Zelda Five — our home — were miners.”

“But what happened to the beautiful planet, Custodian?” Thorden persisted.

There was a pause before the Custodian resumed speaking. “One day its people became afraid of the sun that had given them warmth and light. They studied the strange forces of gravity and magnetism that pervade the cosmos. They built several artificial suns to pour down energy on their planet, and when they had mastered the forces of gravity and magnetism, they took their beautiful planet out of the solar system and went in search of a sun that they were not afraid of.”

“How long ago was this, Custodian?”

The images in the pools of time were fading. “Time doesn’t matter,” said the Custodian, her voice sounding far away. “It’s only a legend.”

“But what was the name of the beautiful planet?”

“Earth,” came the faint reply.

“Dammit!” Thorden shouted. “I’m not interested in your problems, old man! If you wish, I’ll arrange for you to have all the research facilities you need. All I want are straight answers to my questions! Is it possible?”

The old man tried to tidy some papers while he thought. It was the first time that a grand emperor had visited his observatory and he fervently hoped that it was the last.

“Well?” Thorden demanded.

“Time is very strange, you must understand,” said the old man. “It has a variable quality. The rate at which it flows is dependent of the speed of the observer. The mathematics involved is not diff—”

“I’m not interested in the mathematics of the problem!” Thorden bellowed, making the old man wince. “If I built a ship that could travel at near the speed of light, would it be possible for me to leave Zelda Five, journey for what was one hundred and fifteen years to me, and return to discover that a million years had passed here?”

“Well, yes,” said the old man doubtfully. “I suppose it would be possible assuming that you could build such an advanced ship.”

“Thank you!”

“And live for one hundred and fifteen years.”

Astra propped herself more comfortably against the dwarf fruit tree and sunk her small white teeth appreciatively into an apple. She crunched noisily and held the apple in front of Darv’s face for him. He was stretched out on the grass beside her wearing only a pair of shorts. He took a bite at the apple.

“Your chest is getting really hairy,” she teased. “And you’re losing your freckles.”

Darv said nothing, preferring to savour the warmth of the solar lighting that beat down from the inside of the farm gallery’s roof. His hand strayed languidly on to Astra’s leg and caressed her thigh through the thin material of her one-piece suit.

Astra bit into the apple again. "What do you suppose is done to the fruit to make it taste so awful?" she asked.

"I thought there'd been a slight improvement," said Darv sleepily, moving his hand further up Astra's leg.

"But why process it? There's nothing wrong with it the way it is?"

"Perhaps Angel One and Two do something special to it during processing."

"Like what?"

Darv grinned up at her. "I don't know. Something to keep you young and innocent."

Astra retaliated by jabbing Darv in the stomach. Then she was laughing hysterically as Darv sat astride her and proceeded to tickle her ribs.

"No — Darv! Stop it!"

She felt his hands move to her chest and began fighting him off in earnest. Darv caught her flailing fists and pinned them together with one hand on the grass behind her head. Her long blonde hair was entangled across her face. Darv brushed it away. He was grinning down at her.

"Do you give in?"

For an answer she tried crashing her knees into the small of his back but he merely shifted his weight down until she could no longer move her legs.

"You're hurting me, you idiot!"

"You used to like wrestling."

"Not now I don't." She tried arching her body to dislodge him but he was too strong for her.

"Then you've changed."

She began to panic when she felt Darv's free hand move to the top of the seam on her suit. She squirmed frantically. "What are you doing!"

"I only want to look at you, Astra. We always used to play naked together in the reservoir."

"No, Darv — please!" She struggled violently and very nearly succeeded in getting a hand free until he tightened his grip. She felt him hook a finger under the seam and made one last despairing attempt to wriggle free as he opened the seam from neck to stomach. She felt cool air on her skin and realised that there was no point in

further struggle. She lay still, fighting to get her breath back, and opened her eyes. Darv had suddenly released his hold on her hands and was staring down at her breasts, his eyes round with shock.

“Astra,” he whispered. “Astra ... I’m sorry.”

She folded an arm across her eyes so that he would not see the tears that were coming.

Darv eased his weight on to the grass and guiltily tried to close the seam on Astra’s suit, but she seized his hand and held it tightly. He misinterpreted the gesture and tried to reassure Astra that he wasn’t going to touch her. She answered by pulling him down and holding his head hard against her chest. Darv did not know whether half a minute or half an hour passed with them both lying perfectly still, but it ended with Astra’s body suddenly shaking with uncontrolled sobs.

* * * *

Sharna regarded Thorden in surprise. “But why, Thorden? You have an empire to run.”

Thorden grunted. “A handful of sterile moons orbiting Zelda, and a collection of barren worked-out asteroids. There’re no more pirates and no more fun. What I need is excitement, Sharna.”

“And you think that searching for Earth is going to be exciting? Well you’re wrong. It’s going to take several years to reach the nearest star cluster before we can even start searching.” Sharna resumed cleaning the telescope’s set of camera lenses — a task that she would not let the service androids carry out because once they had managed to break one.

“Telson said that we’ll spend the time in suspended animation,” Thorden pointed out. “He told me that it’s just like going to sleep and waking up the next morning except that you feel a bit stiffer.” He toyed with one of the lenses until Sharna took from him.

“What did Telson say?” she asked.

“He said that it’s fine by him if you’re in agreement.”

Sharna considered. “Would you take orders from me or Telson?”

Thorden gave an expansive grin. All was going according to plan. “But of course.” He slipped an arm around Sharna’s waist and chuckled. “And we won’t be searching for Earth all the time, will we?”

Sharna's instinctive reaction was to push Thorden away but she realised that she didn't object to his touch or his smell. Nor did she raise any objections when Thorden turned her round so that she was facing him. He cradled her face in his broad powerful hands and said: "You know something, my aloof and mysterious little Sharna? You're going to be really quite something when you're a bit older."

"Two Zelda Five shuttles approaching." Telson's voice said from a speaker. "Screen Three. Sharna — I'm busy in the main control room. Will you go to the excursion terminal and see to them?"

"Right away, Telson," Sharna replied.

Thorden glanced at the repeater screen that showed the two approaching shuttles but made no attempt to take his hands away from Sharna's face. "That's Helan's private ferry and Spegal bringing my private ferry," he commented. "Why not let your guardian angels look after them for a few minutes?"

Sharna smiled and disentangled herself from Thorden. "The excursion terminal doesn't come under the angels' control," she explained. "Someone has to be there."

Better and better, thought Thorden as he followed Sharna from the galactic resources centre.

* * * *

The two diminutive spacecraft settled on the floor of the Challenger's excursion terminal having first passed through the huge airlock. The larger of the two ships was Thorden's personal ferry. Unlike Helan's craft, it was designed for atmospheric flight: its sleek, streamlined shape gave it an aggressive, businesslike look. Helan emerged from her craft and exchanged brisk greetings with Sharna and Thorden.

"A very smart shuttle, Thorden," said Sharna as they waited for Spegal to emerge from Thorden's ferry. "Why didn't you use it when you returned to the Challenger?"

Thorden was saved from having to answer the embarrassing question by Spegal's appearance as the ferry's door slid open.

"Spegal!" Thorden boomed, clapping his officer across the shoulders as he stepped down. "Brought her up in one piece I see. Excellent. Excellent."

Spegal beamed. "All completely refitted in accord-

“Have you met Sharna?” Thorden interrupted, treating Spegal to a crushing glare that Sharna didn’t see. “Yes — of course you have. Helan will take you back in her ferry when I’ve handed her my seal of office.”

“So they’ve accepted you?” Helan inquired, eyeing Sharna.

“Of course they’ve accepted me,” Thorden laughed. “Who would refuse my delightful company, eh? Now then, Sharna — if you would show Helan and me to my cabin, please, so that I can hand over my seal. It’s a simple private ceremony that won’t take more than a couple of minutes.”

The group moved out of the terminal leaving Spegal alone with Thorden’s ferry. As soon as the door closed, he moved to Helan’s ferry and opened the door.

“Fagor!” he called out nervously.

The android that appeared with great suddenness in the ferry’s doorway was jet black and a little over eight feet tall although its actual height was nearer ten feet because of its ability to hover some two feet above the ground. Sprouting from the android’s armoured body were six powerful manipulators — four of them terminating in wide-angle laser projectors and the other two ending in stubby fingers that looked capable of ripping steel plates in half. It was one of the latter that whipped out, seized Spegal by the collar of his uniform, and lifted him up until his face was level with the two optical sensors on the top of the android’s body.

“Where is the master?” growled the android’s voice. “If anything has happened to him, Fagor kills.” With that the android shook the unfortunate Spegal until he was sure his head was about to fall off.

“He’s all right, Fagor,” Spegal gasped. “You’re picking up his heartbeat, are you not?”

Fagor released his grip and Spegal fell in a sprawling heap. He staggered to his feet and decided that Fagor’s simple program - - that of ensuring Thorden’s will-being — did not require testing.

“You know what you have to do.” said Spegal uneasily, backing off as Fagor drifted nearer. “You’re to keep yourself hidden until the master needs you.”

“And then Fagor kills,” the android announced with grim simplicity while giving Spegal a bad time by waving one of its laser projectors at him.

“But you must not worry if the master’s heartbeat slows down,” Spegal stressed, “because he may have to go into suspended animation. Do

you understand?"

Fagor understood.

"Now hide, Fagor."

Fagor concealed himself behind a chemical fuel storage tank.

Spegal began to feel better and wondered exactly what Fagor would do if anything happened to Thorden. He decided that it would most likely be extremely quick, noisy, and more than a little messy.

* * * *

Thorden chuckled richly to himself when Helan finished outlining the details of the refit to his ferry: the weapon shops had served him well. "And Fagor?" he inquired.

"He's been programed to look after you," Helan replied.

Thorden did not pry any deeper. Helan's attention to detail was legendary.

"What about the two computers." Helan asked.

"The angels?" Thorden grinned. "Probably listening to us at this minute."

Helan flushed angrily. "You mean you haven't screened this cabin?"

"I can handle a couple of angels," said Thorden smoothly. "It won't take me long to find their central switching room. You worry about your instructions. As soon as we discover Earth, I take over the Challenger and return to lead the invasion fleet."

"It could take years, Thorden."

"But think of the prize, Helan! A rich, warm planet with a breathable atmosphere. Can you imagine it? Being able to walk in the open without some sort of spacesuit? Being able to swim in lakes and lie in the sun?"

Helan was silent for a moment as she tried to picture the inconceivable. She shook her head and moved to the doorway. "Good luck then, Thorden. Till we meet again."

"Till we meet again, Helan."

The light polarised as Helan stepped across the threshold and she was gone.

Thorden stretched out on the surprisingly comfortable bed and hooked his hands together at the back of his neck. “Did you hear that, my little angels?”

“We heard,” Angel One replied.

“We can control androids,” said Angel Two.

“You won’t be able to control Fagor, my mischievous little ancillary guardians of environment and life. I have only to give the word and Fagor could either seize control of the Challenger or destroy it. And if he was to get the idea that something has happened to me, he might do just that.”

The guardian angels digested this. “What do you want with us, Thorden?” Angel One asked.

Thorden settled himself comfortably on the bed and grinned up at the sensor set into the cabin’s ceiling. “You two want to find a developed planet pretty bad, I guess. Oh come on angels — I’m Thorden — I know all about freewill computers and I know how you like power. You want power over something more than a survey ship, eh? A planet maybe? A planet like Earth?”

“That could be an accurate assessment.” Angel Two admitted.

“You’re damned right it’s an accurate assessment. As I see it, we’re both after the same thing. So we might as well do a deal.”

* * * *

Darv was sure that he could never tire of looking at Astra’s lithe naked body as she lay asleep on the grass beside him. Compared with the fullness of Della, it was obvious that the changes to Astra’s body were still taking place, but to Darv she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

The solar lights were dimming for the night period and there was a chill in the air. He removed Astra’s arm which she had draped across his chest and gently shook her shoulder to wake her. She opened her eyes and smiled at him.

“I was awake all the time,” she said, sitting up and shaking out her hair. “You were staring at me.”

Darv grinned and pulled her to her feet. “Do you mind?”

Astra shook her head.

“Did I hurt you?”

She thought for a moment. “No. But it was a strange thing to do, don’t you think?”

Darv nodded and helped her as she stepped into her suit and closed the seams. “It was more than strange,” he said candidly, “It was weird. And I can’t for the life of me think why I did it.” He paused and added: “Or why you let me.”

“Darv? Astra?” said Telson’s voice. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes Telson,” Darv replied. “We can hear you.”

“You are both wanted in the main control room in one hour when we’ll be starting preparations to leave the Zelda Five orbit.”

Darv suppressed a yawn. “Where are we going, Telson?” he asked.

“Tersus Nine,” Telson replied. “It’s the nearest star cluster to the solar system and has over two thousand main sequence stars. Sharna and I consider it the best place to start the Earthsearch Mission.”

Astra stared at Darv in alarm; the colour had drained from his face and his eyes appeared to be glazed with shock. “Darv?” she said anxiously. “What’s the matter?” She had to repeat the question twice.

“Tersus Nine ...” Darv whispered.

“What about it? Darv — answer me!”

He focussed his eyes on her. “The Paradise recording,” he said hollowly. “I didn’t dream it, Astra! I knew I didn’t dream it! Star Cluster — Tersus Nine was where Commander Sinclair of the second-generation crew said that they had found the planet that they called Paradise!”

Part Six: Across the Abyss

For two years the mighty ship had plunged across the awesome void of interstellar space at three-quarters of the speed of light while its cargo of five human beings slept the death sleep of suspended animation, watched over by the guardian angels.

For two years Fagor had remained still and silent, hidden in the excursion terminal, listening to the slow heartbeat of his master who lay with the four members of the Challenger's crew in suspended animation. For each minute of the two years Thorden's heart had beaten once, and for each minute of the two years Fagor had been reassured.

* * * *

The surgical android moved slowly along the suspended animation tanks, carrying out its routine nutrient and oxygen supply checks. It stopped when it came to the tank in which Sharna's pale body floated. Following Angel Two's instructions, the android withdrew the plastic tubes from her body and, locating the correct spot with its delicate manipulators, carefully slid a hypodermic needle into a vein. The android waited until it noted the rapid eye movements beneath Sharna's closed eyelids before removing the needle and signalling a service android to lift her body from the tank on to the recovery grid.

While Sharna's respiration and pulse rate gradually returned to normal, the surgical android carried out tests which, like the recovery procedure just used, were not past of the normal revival routine. It eased Sharna on to her side and pushed her knees up to her chin before pushing a probe into her body to check the development of her ovaries. A whole series of minor tests followed that included measuring the fatty deposits on her hips, and even the volume of her breasts. The conclusion that the surgical android communicated to Angel Two was that Sharna was now sexually fully developed. Also, she was approaching full consciousness.

"Sharna," said Angel Two softly. "Can you hear me, Sharna?"

Sharna stirred on the recovery grid and mumbled something that the

guardian angel could not distinguish.

“Listen carefully, Sharna. We are about to wake you. We are about to wake you. You and the others have been in suspended animation for two years... Can you hear me, Sharna?” The masculine voice was soothing and reassuring.

“Hear you, Angel Two...” escaped from Sharna’s lips.

“The Challenger is halfway to the Tersus Nine Star Cluster, Sharna.”

“Going to wake us,” muttered Sharna.

“Only you, Sharna. We are waking you and no one else.”

Sharna moved her legs languidly and rolled onto her back. Her eyes remained closed.

“When you wake up, Sharna, you will discover that your body has changed, and you will accept those changes as being perfectly normal — which they are.”

“Don’t understand...” Sharna muttered.

“Place your hands on your chest, Sharna...”

Sharna’s hands encountered her breasts. The expression on her face gradually changed to one of anguish as he explored the unfamiliar contours. “Ugly,” she said, rolling her head from side to side. “Ugly. Ugly. Ugly!”

“No, Sharna,” said Angel Two’s softly persuasive voice. “You are now very beautiful. And when you wake up you will think of yourself as being perfectly normal because you are normal. And the others are normal... Normal... Do you understand, Sharna?”

“Normal,” Sharna mumbled calming down. “I’m normal...”

“And beautiful.”

“And beautiful.”

The surgical android gave Sharna another injection in response to an instruction from Angel Two.

A minute passed.

Sharna opened her eyes and stared up at the lights.

She sat up.

For an instant she was puzzled by the unaccustomed weight of her breasts and the hair on her body.

“Good day, Sharna,” said Angel Two’s voice brightly. “Time to wake up.”

“Good day to you, Angel Two,” Sharna replied, gazing at the comatose forms of the other four. “Hey? What’s going on? Why am I the only one awake?”

“We need you in the galactic resources centre, Sharna.” said Angel Two smoothly. We’re sorry that we had to wake you but we considered it important.”

“But why only me? Have we reached the star cluster?”

“Not yet. A service android is taking your post-suspended animation meal to the centre. We’ll explain there.”

* * * *

Sharna located the point of light from the co-ordinates that the guardian angels had given her. As soon as she transferred the data on the object to the spectrum analysers she knew it was not a star that she was examining through the optical telescope. For one thing it was moving against the stars and the light she was receiving from it was reflected starlight. Furthermore it was moving on approximately the same course as the Challenger but at a lower speed in relation to the Challenger.

“Range... Over a thousand million miles,” said Sharna, checking the data displays. “We’ll be overhauling it in thirty hours at our present convergent rate.” She thought for a moment. “Nova debris?” she suggested. “An asteroid?”

“Possible but unlikely,” commented Angel Two. “This region is relatively clear of matter. The particle sweeps have hardly replenished the reservoirs.”

“We’re okay for mass?”

“Yes.”

“Okay,” said Sharna. “So what do you and Angel One think it is?”

“It might be a ship. We have signalled it on all bands and allowed several time delays between each set of signals but there has been no response.”

Sharna touched the spectrum analyzer-controls and studied the new information. “About the same size as the Challenger,” she observed. “You were right to wake me. We’ll carry out another observation in fifteen hours. There should be a fifty per cent improvement in

resolution by then.”

Sharna got up from the telescope’s couch and experienced a moment of surprise at the movement of her breasts.

* * * *

The guardian angels decided that if the object was a ship, then it was certain that Sharna would insist that the others should be brought out of suspended animation.

Then there was the problem of Thorden.

They debated Thorden and decided that now was the time to move against him. Killing him would be a simple matter — they could easily account for his death to the others by saying that as a newcomer they did not know enough about his metabolism to sustain him during suspended animation. The big problem the guardian angels had was Fagor. They didn’t know how powerful the android was —perhaps Thorden had been bluffing when he said that Fagor could destroy the Challenger — or maybe he had not. Assuming that Fagor was a force to be reckoned with, how did he know whether or not his master was dead or alive? The guardian angels decided to move with great caution. First they would lower Thorden’s metabolic rate until his heart was beating once every two minutes...

Just to see what happened...

* * * *

The radio pulses that relayed Thorden’s heartbeats ceased.

Fagor stirred and flexed his manipulators. It was the first movement he had made in two years. His second action was internal - - a systematic check of all the weaponry in his formidable arsenal. Two minutes passed. Thorden’s heart gave a beat and Fagor relaxed.

* * * *

Sharna centred the image in the telescope's objective lens. It was completely swamped by the light from the spiral galaxy in Ramedes. She corrected the aberration with a filter and switched the resulting picture to an image intensifier.

Everything else was forgotten as she gaped at the ship in astonishment.

Angel Two broke the silence in the galactic resources centre. "The odds against such an encounter are—"

"I'm not interested!" Sharna snapped. "I want the others revived immediately!"

The picture on the telescope's screen was that of another Challenger.

* * * *

The post-revival method used for Darv, Astra and Telson was the same as that used on Sharna: the hypnotic, persuasive voices of the guardian angels assured them that they would look upon the bodily changes that had taken place as normal although in Sharna's and Astra's cases the changes had already started before they went into suspended animation.

Telson ignored Darv and Astra as they chased each other whooping and yelling round the tanks in the suspended animation chamber. He sat on the edge of the recovery grid and stared down at himself — baffled by the sight of the fine covering of dark hair on his torso and legs.

Darv knocked against Telson as he scrambled across the recovery grid and pinned Astra, laughing and shrieking, against the wall.

"For God's sake!" Telson snarled. "Why can't you two act your age? You're not kids any more!"

Darv released Astra and turned to face Telson. He grinned amiably. "Sorry, Telson. Maybe you'd be happier if I talked our beloved guardian angels into putting you under again?"

Telson regretted his boorish behaviour. "I'm sorry, Darv — Astra... Forgive me."

Astra and Darv stared at Telson in surprise: it was virtually unknown for him to apologise. Astra put a reassuring hand on Telson's knee and looked at him anxiously. "That's all right, Telson," she said. "But

what's the matter?"

As Telson looked into Astra's round blue eyes, he realised for some strange reason that he was ashamed of his nakedness and embarrassed by Astra's nakedness. It had never happened before and it worried him.

"Nothing," he said, shaking his head as if to clear it. He caught sight of Thorden's form lying in its tank. Glad of the chance to change the subject, he said: "Why hasn't Thorden been revived?"

"First thing I asked while you were coming round," said Darv. "The guardian angels don't think Sharna's discovery is any of his business."

* * * *

Telson peered closely at the telescope's repeater screen, hardly able to credit his eyes. He straightened up and glanced at Darv and Astra. They shrugged in reply to his raised eyebrows and continued to stare at the screen and the strange object that was now a million miles away.

"Could it be a reciprocal image of this ship that the telescope's generating Sharna?" he asked.

Sharna shook her head. "I've checked and double-checked every system."

"The Sentinel on the moon mentioned another Challenger that never returned," reminded Astra. "Can you increase the resolution?"

Sharna touched the telescope's controls. The fuzzy picture of the mysterious ship cleared slightly. It was possible to discern the appalling damage it had suffered. The entire ten-mile length of its hull was riddled with holes that varied from craters a few yards across to yawning fissures.

"My God," breathed Telson. "She has been in the wars."

"I'd say the wars have been in her," Darv corrected. "Look at the edges of those holes or whatever they are. "They're splayed outwards — not inward. Meteoroids could never have caused that sort of damage. Those wounds are self-inflicted. Thousands of them."

Telson studied the picture and admitted that Darv was right.

"So what do we do now?" Sharna inquired.

“Simple,” said Telson. “The first thing we do is find out how much time and propellant mass we need to match course and velocity with that thing.”

“To board it?” asked Darv hopefully, fully expecting Telson to veto the suggestion out of hand. But the anticipated rebuff did not come.

“We’ll see,” said Telson.

Well, thought Darv, looking at Telson in surprise. You have changed.

* * * *

After a week consisting of seven ten-hour sessions in the main control room, the crew finally completed the series of precision manoeuvres that ended with the Challenger lying five miles off the seemingly derelict hulk of its sister ship — their respective courses and velocities perfectly matched.

The crew were exhausted. Darv raised no objections to Telson’s sensible suggestion that they all rest for two days before taking further action. In the meantime Angel One and Angel Two would keep the hulk under close surveillance and immediately report any signs of life or movement.

* * * *

The guardian angels issued further instructions to the surgical android that was watching over Thorden’s near lifeless body in the suspended animation chamber.

The machine reduced the operational working levels of the nutrient and oxygen feeds with the result that Thorden’s pulse slowed to one heartbeat every five minutes.

In the excursion terminal on the opposite side of the ship, Fagor stirred and decided to familiarise himself with the Challenger’s layout.

* * * *

Astra stopped combing her hair and gazed pensively across the waters of the reservoir. It was evening. The overhead lights were low and a mist was rising off the water.

“Do you want to know something?” she said to Darv who was sprawled on his stomach beside her. “The reservoir is my favourite place in the whole ship.”

“You’ve never explored the whole ship so you don’t know.”

“Do you suppose that there’s still hundreds of lakes all over the Earth?”

“You’ve seen the holograms and videos.”

Astra leaned across Darv and kissed him between the shoulder-blades. “But that was the Earth of a million years ago... If I ever have a baby I shall want to watch him playing with you in a real lake, under a real sun. Not like this.”

Darv yawned. “First we have to discover how babies happen.”

Astra laughed softly. “I think I know now.”

Her statement prompted Darv to propel himself on one elbow and stare at her, “You think you know?”

“It’s strange,” mused Astra, “but when we came out of suspended animation, I suddenly realised that I knew that I knew... That I knew everything. Didn’t you feel the same? As if you’d remembered something you’d forgotten?”

“All I wish I could remember are the details in the Paradise recording.”

“You never will,” said Astra. “For the simple reason that there’s no such recording.”

“But I’m telling you there is!”

Astra gave a sudden scream and pointed across the reservoir. “Darv! Over there!”

Darv jumped to his feet and stared in the direction of Astra’s outstretched finger. “What’s the matter?”

“I saw something moving!”

“Well there’s nothing there now. Perhaps it was a service android?”

Astra’s face was white and her hands were trembling. She shook her head. “No, Darv — it was far too big, and none of the service androids are black.”

It took them thirty minutes to walk round the perimeter of the

reservoir to the spot where Astra claimed to have seen the strange android.

She seized Darv's arm and pointed. "There! Now do you believe me?"

A hole over ten feet high had been blasted through the bulkhead that separated the reservoir from one of the major ducts that conducted water vapour to the farming galleries. The melted edges of the hole were still warm to Darv's touch.

"Looks like it's finally happened," he said ruefully. "A service android's gone berserk. Either that or they've cut this hole to get some specialised machinery into the duct."

* * * *

Fagor's appearance when he entered the controlled zones caused Angel One and Angel Two considerable alarm. For one thing his armament matched up to Thorden's claims, and for another, the malignant machine seemed to sense that something was amiss with its master. But Fagor's presence did nothing to weaken the guardian angels in their resolve to destroy Thorden. They assumed that Fagor had a simple brain. From that false premise they also assumed that it would be easy to get Fagor to leave the Challenger on some pretext so that the meteoroid annihilation shields could deal with him.

* * * *

"Not now," said Telson, securing his PD weapon in its holster. "The service androids are always carrying out structural work so I don't see what you're worried about."

"Telson," said Astra. "This isn't structural work — it's an enormous hole."

"Enormous," emphasised Darv who was helping Sharna into a mobility suit.

Telson snapped his helmet into place and opened the visor.

"You're right to report it Darv. I'll look at it as soon as we get back." He moved to the shuttle's steps. "Ready Sharna?"

“Ready,” Sharna pulled on her gauntlets.

The four shook hands.

“Now don’t worry about us,” said Sharna in reply to Astra’s anxious expression. “I daresay Telson and I will do a better job of looking after ourselves than you and Darv did on Kyros.”

* * * *

An hour later, when Darv and Astra had returned to the main control room, the space shuttle, with Sharna and Telson on board, separated from the Challenger and moved towards the derelict hulk. The narrow gap between the two ships meant that it was possible for Telson to move the shuttle by means of its directional thrusters rather than use the main engine.

Sharna switched on the shuttle’s exterior lights when they were within five hundred yards of the drifting ship. “No problem getting in by the look of it,” she commented, operating the controls that played the lights over the mass of holes and ruptures that covered the scarred outer skin.

Telson guided the shuttle towards the largest hole while continuing to send reports on their progress to Darv and Astra.

The ship loomed larger and larger in Telson’s and Sharna’s field of vision until they could no longer see the stars. The mighty fissure they were heading for yawned black and forbidding like the maw of a creature from the terror videos. Sharna aimed the hull searchlight into the black hole and illuminated a bulkhead that was set far enough in from the outer skin to provide room for the shuttle to manoeuvre once inside.

Telson positioned the shuttle in the exact centre of the hole with the aid of brief stabs from the thrusters. He gave Sharna an encouraging smile and opened up the thrusters that propelled the shuttle into the hull.

* * * *

Radio contact with the shuttle was lost a few seconds after it entered

the hull. It had been expected but that did not prevent Darv from swearing softly. He had hoped that the number of holes in the hulk would permit the passage of some radio signals.

He switched on two scanners and listened. There was nothing.

Unknown to him and Astra, the guardian angels decided that the moment had arrived to order the destruction of Thorden.

The fateful command was issued to the surgical android.

Five minutes later Thorden crossed the fine boundary line that separated suspended animation from death.

And five minutes after that Fagor went berserk.

* * * *

The interior of the deserted ship was in much better condition than its exterior appearance suggested. Telson and Sharna were surprised to discover that most of the damage to the inner bulkheads had been repaired — albeit somewhat crudely in places. The only gravity was the natural but feeble force created by the ship's mass so that Telson had little trouble controlling the shuttle as it moved through the wide abandoned galleries.

Sharna's lights picked out a massive rust-encrusted bulkhead that blocked the gallery.

At that moment Sharna sensed that something was very wrong, "Rust?" she said to Telson. "How can there be rust if this place is in a permanent vacuum?"

"Could be some other form of corrosion," Telson reasoned. "Anyway we've seen enough and come far enough for our first inspection. "We'd best be getting back."

Telson operated the thrusters so that the shuttle pirouetted about its axis to face the way it had come.

"Oh please dear God — no," said Sharna, her voice a horrified whisper when the shuttle had completed its turn. "Tell me it's a dream."

But there was nothing dreamlike about the steel bulkhead that was sliding closed in front of the shuttle so that Sharna and Telson were trapped.

Fagor blasted his way through several walls on his route to the Challenger's main control room.

"Fagor! Listen to me!" said Angel One's voice.

Fagor stopped work on melting a passage through a bulkhead and glared around at the empty gallery. "Who speaks to Fagor!" he roared. "The killers of the Lord Thorden! Fagor will destroy them!"

"Fagor — listen."

The giant android located the source of the sound and fired all of his lasers simultaneously.

"That merely destroys one voice terminal," said Angel One. "There are a million such terminals throughout the ship."

"Then Fagor will destroy a million voice terminals!" And suiting actions to words, he annihilated four more. "Fagor will avenge the death of the Grand Emperor by destroying his murderers!"

"We will help you, Fagor," said Angel Two.

"Another voice," growled Fagor. "Fagor does not like voices. Fagor kills voices!" More voice terminals were wiped out.

Clearly Fagor wasn't fooling. The guardian angels formed the impression that he was going to be much more tricky to deal with than they had anticipated. Such single-mindedness in an android was outside their experience.

"Listen, Fagor!" said Angel One. "Those who killed your master have left the ship and have entered the ship we are lying alongside. Go after them and we will guide you, but you will have to leave the Challenger!"

Fagor was unimpressed by the offer of help and said so. He resumed blasting his way through the bulkhead and announced that he intended to seize control of the Challenger and plunge it into a sun.

The guardian angels decided that they would have to rethink their relationship with Fagor.

Even before the door had finished closing, artificial gravity came on. Without Telson having a chance to compensate with the directional thrusters, the shuttle settled on its landing skids. Telson decided that he might as well conserve fuel so he shut the thrusters down, allowing the shuttle to remain where it was.

“You’d better switch the lights off, Sharna,” he said tiredly. “God knows how long it’s going to take us to think ourselves out of this mess.”

Sharna closed down the exterior lights and left one light on in the cabin. She was about to say something but cocked her head on one side.

“Hear anything?” she asked Telson.

Telson listened for a moment and then he heard the faint hissing sound. He and Sharna gaped at each other. “Air!” Telson exclaimed. “By God, Sharna — we’re in a working airlock!”

It was a guess but after ten minutes it began to look as if Telson had been correct: the shuttle’s instruments were indicating that the ambient atmospheric pressure was ninety per cent, that the air was breathable, and the temperature tolerable.

“Okay,” said Sharna, making doubly certain that the instruments were giving correct readings. “We might as well go out.”

“No,” Telson stated flatly, his innate caution prevailing.

Sharna sighed. “Then tell me what good we’re going to do sitting in here feeling sorry for ourselves?” She rapped playfully on the visor of Telson’s helmet. “We can keep our mobility suits on,” she said with her usual practical assurance. “So we’ll be okay if there is a serious leak. And in any case, we won’t go far from the shuttle.”

Telson saw the sense in Sharna’s reasoning and agreed.

A few minutes later the shuttle’s outer door opened. Telson and Sharna emerged clutching arc lanterns and PD weapons. They set off in opposite directions to examine the bulkheads that formed their prison.

Sharna was the first to find something.

“Telson — over here.”

“What?”

Sharna pointed to a touch-control panel. “Identical to the wall panels in the Challenger for operating the personnel airlock doors,” she observed.

“Except that there’s no door,” said Telson, training his arc lantern on the rust-streaked surface of the bulkhead.

Sharna rubbed her gauntlet on the corroded steel, releasing a fine shower of rust particles. “There.” She pointed. “A door.”

Telson looked closer and could make out a fine vertical line. Before he could raise an objection, Sharna had touched the control panel. The join that Sharna had exposed became the outline of a small door. It strained for a second to overcome the friction of neglected moving parts and then slid sideways.

The scene that greeted them was so unexpected, so unbelievable, that they both stepped through the doorway, refusing to credit the evidence presenting to them through the restricted field of their visors.

They were standing in a crowded marketplace which was thronged with men and women of all ages. They were swarming around gaily-painted but rickety stalls, shouting and bargaining at the tops of their voices.

The first thought that occurred simultaneously to Telson and Sharna was that they were viewing a huge hologram. But the reality and depth of the scene told them that this was not so.

“Monsters!” screamed a voice. “Underpeople monsters!”

A hundred startled faces turned towards Telson and Sharna.

“Monsters!” the cry went up. Suddenly people were screaming and stalls were overturned.

“No!” cried Telson, taking several steps forward. “We’re not monsters! We’re just like you!” He dropped his PD weapon and lantern and fumbled awkwardly in an attempt to open his visor.

Panic took hold of the crowd; more stalls were overturned and people were trampled underfoot as the great mass drove themselves into a blind, unthinking stampede. Those who fell, even the injured ones, jumped to their feet and, with fearful glances over their shoulders, threw themselves into the receding wake of the scattering, screaming mob. They disappeared down wide corridors that opened into the vast main gallery that formed the marketplace.

Telson and Sharna stood stock still, unable to think clearly or speak coherently. A vehicle with a howling siren and flashing lights on its roof came hurtling out of one of the corridors and charged across the marketplace. It moved on rubber-rimmed wheels that screeched loudly and released clouds of blue smoke as the vehicle skidded to a standstill within twenty yards of where Telson and Sharna were

standing.

“The door!” Telson yelled. “Let’s get out of here!”

They spun round but the door had closed.

“Stay where you are and don’t move!” barked a voice from the vehicle. One move from either of you and we open fire.”

It was the sort of voice that commanded instant attention and obedience. Telson and Sharna stood perfectly still.

“Drop your weapons!”

Sharna and Telson allowed their lanterns and PD weapon to clatter to the ground.

“Now turn around and walk slowly towards us with your hands above your heads.”

* * * *

First Captain Praston Kroll, Deputy Chief Executive of Holocaust City, regarded Dren’s captives and silently cursed all policemen — especially policemen who came between him and his hangover.

“Telson and Sharna, sir,” said Dren, dumping the two mobility suits he had removed from his prisoners in an untidy heap on Kroll’s desk. “The female is Sharna. They were wearing these, sir — obviously designed to cause panic.”

“Now look—’ began Telson.

“You will not speak unless you are spoken to!” Dren shouted. He noticed Kroll’s pained expression and added: “Sorry, sir.”

Kroll nodded. “Thank you, Dren. A protracted party at the chief executive’s house last night.”

Kroll managed a smile for the prisoners’ benefit. “My name is Kroll. I have the customary four other names which I won’t bore you with but I would like to hear your full names please.”

“We don’t have other names,” said Sharna. “We’re from the starship Challenger which is lying alongside—’

“You will confine yourself to answering questions!” Dren bellowed. He remembered Kroll’s party and blurted out a hasty apology.

“Your citizens’ numbers then please,” Kroll requested. “Hold out your

wrists.”

“No numbers, sir,” said Dren. “I’ve checked.”

Kroll’s expression hardened. “Now that is most interesting, Telson and Sharna.”

“Will you let me speak?” asked Telson.

Kroll shrugged and waved an expansive hand.

“We’re from a starship,” said Telson. “The sister ship to this one.”

“I’m very stupid, Telson. You must explain. What is a starship?”

Telson stared at Kroll in surprise. “But you must know. You’re living on one!”

“On one what?”

Telson felt Sharna’s hand slide into his own. “Well... A starship.”

“I see. And what does a starship do?”

“Well — it travels to the stars.”

Kroll nodded sagely. “Ah, yes — of course. And where are these... stars? Perhaps you would like to tell me, Sharna?”

“The stars are in space,” said Sharna simply.

“All of them?”

“I don’t think much of your sense of humour.”

“And I don’t think much of underpeople terrorising the citizens of Holocaust City,” Kroll replied pointedly.

“What are underpeople?” asked Telson.

Kroll turned his attention to Telson. “Or underpeople that insult my intelligence by telling me lies.”

There was a silence. Dren held up two PD weapons. “These are their sidearms, sir. Similar to ours. We’ve tested them.”

Kroll nodded to Telson. “Your technology is improving it seems. The time is fast approaching when another war with you will be required.”

“May I ask you a question?” Sharna inquired.

“By all means.”

“Do you know what space is?”

“But of course, my child. As deputy of Holocaust City, I’m entitled to more space than any other citizen, with the exception of the chief executive, of course.”

“So you don’t know what is beyond Holocaust City?” Sharna persisted.

“The underpeople,” said Kroll distastefully. “Filled with creatures such as yourselves.”

“Look,” said Telson. “If you would let us take you to our space shuttle, we could show you our ship — and even your ship from the outside. We could show you space and the stars. We can show you the heavens — billions of stars and countless galaxies - - the entire glory of the Creation!”

“It’s no use,” said Sharna, breaking the silence that followed. “They obviously don’t want to know.”

“This concept of space you have,” said Kroll, leaning back in his chair. “It is obviously very important to you?”

Telson looked scathingly at Kroll. “Well of course space is important. It’s where everything is.”

“Including the underworld?”

“Including the underworld; including Earth...”

Kroll looked surprised. “Earth?” he said, allowing his chair to fall forward.

“Why, yes,” said Telson hopefully. “Have you heard of Earth?”

“Yes... Yes — we’ve heard of Earth.” Kroll looked sharply at his captives. “Is Earth important to you?”

“Yes,” said Telson. “We’re searching for it.”

Kroll raised his eyebrows but said nothing.

“We were born in space on the Challenger,” Telson continued, “but the Earth is the home of our grandparents — our spiritual home if you like. And yours too because you are also descended from the people of Earth.”

Kroll thought for a moment and gave Telson and Sharna a broad, warm smile. “If only you had said right at the beginning that you were searching for Earth — it would have saved so much misunderstanding all round.”

“Then we can go?” Sharna asked hopefully.

“But of course, my child. We’ll send you on your way in the morning. But first you must dine with me as my guests of honour. Afterwards my servants will prepare a room for you. It’s small but I’m sure you will find it most comfortable.” Kroll beamed at Telson and Sharna in turn and rose to his feet to shake hands with them.

Sharna lay awake, watching the early morning light edge across the ceiling of the tiny bedroom. She had not been able to sleep all night. There had been so much to think about — so many thoughts and questions that had followed close on the heels of the night's abandonment. Telson lay asleep beside her. As she looked at him, she realised with a start of surprise that it had taken her twenty-five years to discover that his brusque manner had been nothing more substantial than a flimsy camouflage for his shyness. Why had it taken so long? Why had they been children yesterday and adults today?

"Telson..."

"Mm?"

"It's getting light. I wonder how they do that?"

"Some form of diffused lighting radiated from inside the dome," Telson replied, pulling a cover over his head. "Probably controlled by computers that they don't even know exist. He sat up suddenly and stared at Sharna. "I'm... I'm sorry," he stammered. "I'd forgotten about... about—"

Sharna laughed at his embarrassment. "It doesn't matter, Telson. Really it doesn't."

There was a loud banging on their door. "Time to get up in there!" yelled a servant's voice. "Big day today!"

"Earth," said Sharna, falling back on the pillow. "I can't really believe it, Telson."

Telson wanted to slap her playfully as Darv would have slapped Astra. Instead he said: "Come on — we'd better get dressed."

Kroll marched into the room, all smiles and good cheer. "Good morning, Sharna — Telson. How was the breakfast? If it fell even slightly short of perfect, I shall have my servants flogged."

Sharna and Telson assured him that their breakfast had been beyond

criticism.

“Splendid. Splendid,” said Kroll rubbing his hands. “Are we ready?”

“Are we really on our way to Earth?” said Sharna.

“But of course, my child. Of course. There’s no point in waiting any longer and there’s a large crowd waiting to say goodbye to you.” Kroll chuckled. “Your arrival yesterday created quite an impression you know. I think we’ll walk. It’s not far. Come.”

* * * *

The silent crowd packed into the marketplace opened a path in front of Kroll as he strode towards the wooden platform. Telson and Sharna followed with Dren close behind. Kroll nodded and smiled to faces he knew in the crowd, but ignored outstretched hands that might slow his pace. He mounted the steps that led to the top of the railed platform and beckoned Telson and Sharna to follow.

Kroll shook hands with a masked man who was waiting on the platform and examined the two lengths of rope that the masked man held out for his inspection.

“Excellent. Excellent.” said Kroll, beaming around at the sea of expectant faces. “Sharna. Telson. If you would stand over here please.”

“I think there’s been some sort of mistake,” Telson said, moving to the indicated position. He pointed to the far bulkhead. “Our space shuttle is on the other side of that wall.”

The masked man tossed the ropes over a heavy beam that was suspended above the platform.

“Now look,” said Sharna, exchanging a baffled look with Telson. “How can you send us—”

“What religion are you?” Kroll inquired. “Do you have religions in the underworld?”

Telson stared at him. “Religion?”

Kroll smiled. “The general prayers, I fancy, Dren. And the hoods as there are children present. I despair of some parents.”

Dren stepped forward to face Sharna and Telson. He found the place in the book he was hunting through and began to recite:

“Oh Mighty Power — Guardian of the Fusion Reactors of our beautiful Holocaust City — Giver of Light and Warmth — Sentinel of the Food Farms - - we ask you to accept the spirits of these two creatures into your Kingdom of the Planet Earth where they will find life everlasting.” @NEW PAGE = “Excellent,” said Kroll, still beaming as he fastened the nooses around Telson’s and Sharna’s necks. “I’ll just make sure you’re standing in exactly the right spots and you’ll be on your way.”

Part Seven: New Blood

It had been eight hours since Telson and Sharna had entered the hulk. Darv decided that he could no longer bear the strain of doing nothing. He left his seat in the Challenger's main control room, grabbed Astra by the wrist, and dragged her to the entrance.

"We're going after them," he said in answer to Astra's protests.

"But we can't leave the ship while that android's on the loose, Darv. Not after what Angel One and Two warned us what it could do."

"They created the problem by failing to maintain Thorden properly while he was in suspended animation — if you believe their story that they didn't have enough data on his metabolism. Let them worry about Fagor — we've got to do something about Telson and Sharna."

"We don't have a shuttle," Astra pointed out.

"There's Thorden's ferry."

"Which we don't know how to operate."

"Listen," said Darv harshly. "We didn't know how to operate the shuttle until we tried, so stop raising objections!"

* * * *

The controls of Thorden's ferry were simple but different. Darv had little trouble steering it out of the Challenger's excursion terminal and towards the drifting hulk. Guiding the ferry inside the narrow confines of the dark galleries was more difficult.

Astra's warning cry was too late and the impact with the rusting bulkhead, despite the ferry's crawling pace, was enough to throw her against the blank control panel.

"Sorry," said Darv, backing the ferry away from the obstruction. He peered ahead to where the gallery divided into two. "Which one do we take? Left or right?"

Astra didn't answer. She was staring at the control panel before her that had unaccountably come to life as a mass of glowing touch-

control areas and function identifications.

“Darv,” she said quietly. “Take a look at this panel.”

Darv looked and his eyes widened. “Plasma cannons...” he read aloud. “Heat-seeking anti-personnel lasers... Infrared followers... Wow!”

“Don’t touch!” Astra warned, seeing Darv’s finger moving to one of the touch-control zones.

There was a sudden blaze of intense white light outside the ferry’s forward view ports. When the latent images stopped dancing on their retinas, Darv and Astra saw that an entire section of bulkhead ahead of them had disappeared.

“Wow!” said Darv again. “If this was Thorden’s idea of an unarmed ferry, I wonder what the armed ones are like?”

They moved on, threading their way slowly through the labyrinth of corridors and galleries, not worrying about the problem of finding their way back because the ferry’s inertial navigation system was recording every twist and turn.

The figure picked out in the ferry’s external lights waved to them. Darv set the ferry down hastily in the centre of the gallery and gaped through the view port. “Now what do you suppose that is?” he said.

The strange figure was wearing a crude, ungainly mobility suit. It approached the ferry and pointed at the outer airlock door. Darv tried to contact the figure by radio but without success; it continued to alternate its gestures between friendly waves and pointing at the airlock door.

“It doesn’t appear to be armed with a PD weapon or anything,” Astra observed. “And it’s obviously trying to tell us something...”

“Do we let it in?” Darv queried.

“Why not? We could keep our PDs trained on it.”

“Okay. I can always blame you if anything goes wrong.” With that, Darv touched the control to open the outer airlock door.

The figure was lost to sight as it entered the airlock, Darv closed the outer door and equalised the airlock air pressure. He and Astra turned round in their seats and aimed their weapons at the inner door.

“Ready?” said Darv.

Astra nodded. Darv touched the control on the panel and the inner door hissed open. He could just make out the gleam of a pair of eyes inside the figure’s helmet. The figure hesitated a second and then walked towards them.

“Hold it there,” Darv commanded, stretching out his arm and pointing his weapon at the creature’s head in case it did not understand his language. The figure understood. It stopped.

“Take your helmet off.”

The figure’s hands went up, released the helmet’s catches and lifted it off its shoulders. Long black hair cascaded on to the figure’s shoulders.

“Hallo,” said the girl brightly, giving Darv and Astra a friendly smile. “Universe — am I glad to see you! And you speak our language! We were all desperately worried in case the first couple were the only people from your ship. I say, are those things awfully dangerous? It’s just that I’m about to be licensed for child-bearing and it would be awful if anything happened to me. I’d never get another chance-“

“Hold on. Hold on,” said Darv, more than slightly confused by this unexpected turn of events. “First things first. Who are you?”

“Oh Universe! You must think I’m rude. My name’s Lenart.” She began divesting herself of the clumsy mobility suit. What emerged caused Astra to scowl and Darv to stare. “You know,” Lenart said cheerfully, unconcerned that Darv was gaping at her exposed breasts, “we heard that the first couple spoke our language but we refused to believe the reports. There’s so few of us left that we have to send half-trained observers into Holocaust City.” She giggled. “Oh sorry. I always talk too much when I’m nervous. I suppose you want to know about your friends? They were arrested yesterday in the marketplace.”

“I think I’m going insane,” Darv muttered to Astra. “Lenart. What marketplace? Who arrested them?”

“Can this spacecraft function in an atmosphere?” Lenart asked excitedly.

“I don’t see why not,” said Darv.

“Is it armed?”

“Yes it is,” Astra said hotly. “And if you don’t-“

“Just a minute,” Darv intervened. “Lenart — are our friends in danger?”

Lenart nodded. “But we can rescue them if we’re quick. Let’s get moving and I’ll explain.”

“You’ll explain now!” said Astra.

“No — please. There isn’t enough time. We must get this spacecraft through the gallery airlocks as quickly as possible.”

Darv followed Lenart’s complex directions through a series of

corridors that were barely wide enough for the ferry to negotiate. After five minutes they emerged into an open space lined with rusting bulkheads that bore signs of hasty repairs in some places.

“We’re back near the hull’s outer skin.” Lenart explained. “We’re in the airlock where your friends left their shuttle yesterday. We must wait for the air pressure to build up.”

“Where’s this marketplace?” Darv demanded.

Lenart pointed at the ancient-looking bulkhead that lay ahead. “On the other side of that.” She leaned forward and looked at the weapons panel in front of Astra. “Universe!” she exclaimed. “Laser cannons! Just what we need for blasting through.”

“Do you know how to use them?” Darv asked.

“I’m sure I do,” said Lenart enthusiastically.

“Astra — let Lenart sit there.”

Astra surrendered her seat to Lenart with a scowl but without argument.

“Pressure’s up to one atmosphere,” Darv reported. “Now what?”

Lenart gave a whoop and hit the laser cannon controls. The airlock filled with blinding white light that was painful to look at. Lenart discovered how to swing the murderous beams of energy from side to side. “Forward!” she yelled. “Death to Holocaust City!”

Unable to see where he was going, Darv drove the ferry forwards fully expecting it to collide with the bulkhead. Instead they emerged into a huge open space that was as vast as the farming galleries on the Challenger. Below them were hundreds of people crowded around a raised platform.

“Lower!” screamed Lenart, her face flushed with excitement.

Darv pushed the ferry’s nose down and Lenart immediately opened fire again with the laser cannons, sending raw energy blazing into the crowd. She added to the uproar with a continuous stream of bloodthirsty yells that chilled Darv’s blood and made it difficult for him to concentrate.

The crowd scattered before the onslaught. When his retinas cleared after one particularly sustained blast Darv saw that the beams had cut a swath of death right through the crowd. The nightmare scene she had created had no effect on Lenart’s aim for she continued to fire off random blasts at anything that moved.

“The scaffold!” she yelled. “Get over to the scaffold!”

Darv presumed that she was referring to the raised platform in the centre of the emptying marketplace. There were some figures standing on the platform.

“Telson and Sharna!” Astra suddenly screamed in Darv’s ear.

“There they are! Lenart — for God’s sake stop firing!”

“It’s all right!” whooped Lenart. “I’m keeping my fire away from them! Death to Holocaust City!”

Darv swept low over the heads of the fleeing crowd as he swung the ferry towards the platform. He could see Sharna and Telson frantically waving. Two figures who were trying to restrain them jumped to the ground and ran when they saw the ferry alter course towards them. A beam fired by Lenart passed dangerously close to the platform and tore into the ground ahead of the two fleeing figures.

“Missed!” Lenart howled.

“Lenart! For God’s sake stop firing!” Darv yelled. “Astra! Drag her away and get back to the airlock doors. I’m going to open both of them!”

Astra dragged Lenart’s head back by her magnificent long hair and informed Lenart that she ran the risk of having her throat cut unless she stopped the insane massacre. Lenart took the hint and ceased firing.

She grinned at Darv, her breasts heaving and gleaming with perspiration. “Universe! That was much more fun than the sex competitions!”

Under normal circumstances Darv would have wanted to know more about the sex competitions but he was concentrating on bringing the ferry down to a low hover over the platform. He opened the airlock doors and heard the distant screams of the receding crowd. Astra called out urgently to Sharna and Telson. A few seconds later the ferry dipped under their weight as they scrambled aboard.

Telson sank on to a seat when the hurried greetings were over. He shook his head disbelievingly. “Those idiots were going to hang us.”

Darv grinned as he eased the ferry up to a safe height. “Don’t blame them if you started ordering them about. By the way, this is Lenart. We know as much about her as you do except that she’s a bit bloodthirsty.”

“Hallo,” said Lenart cheerfully, shaking hands with Telson and Sharna. “It’s them or us with the Earth Worshippers, and for once it was them.”

“Earth Worshipers?” queried Astra.

“A long story,” said Sharna.

Lenart folded her arms around Darv, giving him an exultant hug. “You’d best turn the ferry around, Darv,” she said. “and I’ll show you back to our regions of the ship. Tandor will want to meet you. She’s our leader.”

“And who exactly are you?” inquired Darv.

Lenart laughed. “I’m one of the underpeople.”

* * * *

Two girls, dark and very pretty like Lenart, ushered Telson into Tandor’s presence and withdrew.

Tandor rose from her couch and smiled warmly at Telson. “Commander Telson. Please come and sit beside me.” She took Telson by the hand and sat him on the long couch, “Lenart has told me all about you, of course. The Earth Worshipers do have the most curious ideas about hospitality.” She smiled again, revealing perfectly formed white teeth.

Telson watched Tandor carefully as she sat beside him. She was a tall, regal figure with dark skin and long hair that was startlingly black. He guessed her to be in her mid-forties. As she leaned back and regarded him, he saw that her flimsy white dress was transparent and that it was all she was wearing.

“Was the meal to your satisfaction, commander?”

“It was fine... Fine ...”

“Please, Commander Telson. There are two things you must do. First you must call me Tandor. Promise?”

Telson nodded and gave a cautious smile. “Promise.”

“And I have to decide what to do with you,” Tandor continued. “Because you are an enemy of the Earth Worshipers, it does not follow that you are a friend of my underpeople. I hope my logic is clear.”

“We’re no one’s enemy. Show us the way out of this hulk and we’ll be on our way.”

Tandor held up her hand. The sleeve of her dress fell to her elbow

revealing flawless skin. "Please tell your story, Commander Telson. Right from the beginning."

Telson marshalled his thoughts and provided Tandor with a detailed account that started with the Challenger's origin and ended with his and Sharna's recent rescue. Tandor listened attentively, nodding her head occasionally, not speaking until Telson had finished.

"So you have never seen Earth?" she inquired.

"No. We were born on the Challenger."

One of the dark, pretty girls entered the room bearing a tray and two drinks which she set on a low table in front of the couch. She flashed Telson a brief smile and left the room.

"Try your drink, Commander Telson. You will find it most refreshing after all that talking."

Telson sipped his drink appreciatively. The taste was strange but most pleasant. He drained the glass and placed it on the table.

"The Challenger is also the name of this ship," said Tandor.

Telson nodded. "We're descended from the same people, Tandor. This ship of yours — or what's left of it — is the sister of our ship."

"That I guessed."

"We thought it was a derelict hulk."

"A hulk, but not derelict," Tandor corrected. The fusion reactors are still working. They provide us with light, warmth, energy —and will continue to do so for many millions of years — just as yours will."

"What happened to your ship?"

Tandor's smile faded. "What little there is left of the ancient records tells us that our ancestors set out from Earth. The second-generation crew divided into two factions over the way the ship ought to be run. One side believed in equality and community effort, and the other side believed in individual endeavour and reward. The difference of opinion became an argument with the third-generation crew; a feud with fourth-generation; and a war with the fifth-generation... A very bitter and bloody war..."

"Which your people lost?"

Tandor shrugged. "We have our independence and they have theirs. We believe that life on the ship represents the sum of our total existence and that we had better make the most of it. We have seen space and the stars and try to understand them. The Earth Worshippers believe that life on the ship is one step to an eternal life

outside time and space on their marvellous, mythical Earth.”

“But surely they know that this ship is... is...” Telson was lost for words for a moment.

“Floating in space?” Tandor suggested.

“Well, yes.”

“We’ve taken prisoners to the observation dome and they’ve either gone insane or accused us of trying to warp their minds with optical illusions.”

Telson stared at her. “How can anyone reject space?”

“Why not? Sealing one’s mind against the truth is something that people excel at. Over the generations the Earth Worshippers have gradually sealed off their minds and their Holocaust City from reality. To them the ship is their universe, and their universe is the ship.”

“We told them that the Earth was a real place, and that we were searching for it,” said Telson.

“Which is why they were going to hang you... You blasphemed against their beliefs.”

Tandor swung her long legs on to the couch giving Telson a tantalising glimpse of more than slender thighs.

“Look, Tandor, your ship could join our ship in the search for the planet Earth. We’re on our way to the Tersus Nine star cluster where there are many main-sequence suns — all within a few light-years of each other. Also it’s the nearest star cluster to the Earth’s original solar system. We’re certain that’s where we’ll find Earth.”

“No, commander.” said Tandor firmly.

“But you know that the Earth exists, Tandor. And if you visit our ship, we can show you the holograms and videos in our library. It’s a planet — an entire planet. Lakes; hills; forests. Your people would become free! They would know what it was like to be outdoors under a blue sky — to feel a warm sun on their backs and a fresh breeze on their faces.”

Tandor’s rippling laughter cut into Telson’s enthusiasm like a knife.

“And you know about these things, commander?”

“Well, no,” said Telson. “But we do have the holograms.”

“Dream machines,” said Tandor contemptuously. “And you think that I should offer my people a beautiful future in which all my dreams come true? Well, I will tell you something, commander. They have had many generations of rulers who have promised them the Earth —

that better times were just around the corner — and they became bitterly disillusioned. There was a revolution and my dynasty came to power and has held on to that power because we have always spoken the truth of the unchanging present. We conserve; we recycle; we maintain a fixed population level. We are not happy all the time but we are content for most of the time.”

“It sounds depressing.” Telson muttered.

Tandor shook her head.

“Not as depressing as dreams that can never be fulfilled,” she said. “And so long as the Elixir of Life banks can be replenished every so often, then there are rare moments of joy in our community.”

“The Elixir of Life?”

Tandor rose from the couch and smiled down at Telson. “You must return to your friends and rest before the special celebration I’m planning in honour of you and Darv.”

“But there are four of us,” Telson protested, rising to his feet. “What about Sharna and Astra?”

Tandor nodded thoughtfully. “They will be most welcome to attend of course. Most welcome.”

Her tone made Telson uneasy. “Thank you, Tandor. Naturally, we’re very grateful for being rescued, and for your kind hospitality, but we would like to be on our way.”

“But I must insist that you stay for the celebration.”

Telson stared at Tandor, perplexed. “But I don’t understand. What is there to celebrate?”

“That you and Darv are different. You both have different colour hair and eyes from everyone else on this ship — different from us and the Earth Worshippers.” Tandor chuckled at Telson’s bewildered expression. “You’re new blood, Telson. New blood!”

* * * *

“New blood?” Darv queried.

“That’s what she said,” Telson answered.

“But she must’ve said what she meant,” said Sharna.

“No.”

“Well, I don’t mind giving blood,” Astra commented. “But they don’t know what blood groups we are or anything — they haven’t tested us.”

“Maybe she was speaking figuratively?” Darv suggested.

Telson looked sharply at Darv. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Darv looked as if he was about to say something. He changed his mind and shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m sorry.”

“Then why say it?”

“I said I’m sorry.”

Telson paced the length of the large room that the four of them had been provided with. “You should never have allowed them to take your PD weapons away from you,” he said irritably.

“You and Sharna lost yours,” Darv pointed out.

“We were captured by the Earth Worshippers!” Telson snapped.

“There’s no point in arguing,” said Sharna, always the practical voice.

“What else is there to do?” Astra muttered. “We don’t know if we’re with friends or enemies. We don’t know where the shuttle is and we don’t know where the ferry is. We don’t even know what Fagor is up to on the Challenger. For all we know, he could be wrecking the ship.”

Telson swore. “Our first task is to find the shuttle or the ferry. It doesn’t matter which.”

“How?” Darv inquired.

Telson gestured irritably. “We just walk out of here and look for them. The door’s not locked.”

“You go ahead and try it,” said Darv grimly. “You walk out of that door and you’ll be joined by two or three pretty girls who’ll look just like Lenart and who will beg you to return to this room.”

“We tried it while you were seeing Tandor,” said Sharna. “Twice. All smiles and apologies. Worried about our safety in case the Earth Worshippers launched a retaliatory attack, they said.”

Telson’s experience at the hands of the Earth Worshippers made him uneasy. “What the hell do they want with us?” he muttered.

“We’re the new blood, remember,” Sharna replied. “So when does this so-called celebration or whatever start?”

“Two hours after the beginning of the night period,” Telson replied.

“You!” roared Fagor. “You halt or Fagor destroys!”

The surgical android halted. Like all such units on the Challenger, it was programed to spend long hours carrying out delicate operations on the human members of the crew without mechanical or electronic failure therefore it had a built-in responsibility to maintain itself in first-class working order. That responsibility manifested itself as a self-preservation instinct which was why it skittered to an abrupt standstill when the appalling black android that it had been trying to avoid bellowed at it.

It watched with mounting apprehension as Fagor skimmed along the corridor towards it and noted in alarm that two of its fellow surgical units were obediently following Fagor at a discreet distance.

Fagor stopped near the surgical android and glared down at it. “You will help Fagor control the ship.”

The surgical android agreed that it would help Fagor control the ship.

The guardian angels observed the unlikely quartet moving through the corridors to the main control room but remained silent, having learned that Fagor did not like the sound of their voices. They decided that they would have to evolve another method of dealing with the fearsome black android.

Darv nearly choked on the barbecued rib that Lenart was holding for him to chew. He sat up and laughingly pushed the girl’s hands away. “No, Lenart, please-I can feed myself.”

Lenart pulled his head back on to her lap. “Don’t you like me feeding you?” she pouted. “Fresh meat specially for you.”

Darv grinned up at her. “It’s the most delicious thing I’ve ever tasted,” he admitted as she carefully wiped the rich sauce from around his mouth with a napkin. He turned his head and looked sheepishly at his companions who were seated on cushions around the huge banquet that had been spread out on the floor of the garden. “What can I do

with her?" he appealed.

Astra pointedly ignored him. She was sitting apart from the rest and had steadfastly refused all offers of food from the dark, smiling girls who periodically helped themselves to selections from the glistening mountains of fruit before rejoining their companions clustered laughing and chattering around the small, heated swimming pool. Some of the partygoers were dancing some were listening to the music, and some were waiting in an orderly if gossipy line at the barbecue where ribs were spitting and hissing over an induction grill.

"God, they're good," said Sharna appreciatively, tearing meat off the bone with her teeth and licking her fingers. She and Telson had their backs propped against each other having discovered that it was the most comfortable way of eating.

"What's the matter with Astra?" asked Telson.

"Oh really, Telson. Can't you guess?"

Telson glanced across at Darv who was trying to push a ripe fruit into Lenart's mouth. Then Lenart was giggling and squirming as Darv used his tongue to catch the rivulets of juice that were trickling down her neck.

"You ought to speak to him, Telson," said Sharna. "It's not right that he should carry on like that in front of Astra."

Telson didn't want to get involved, nor did he consider that Darv and Lenart were misbehaving. If Astra wanted to sulk at nothing, that was her affair. Instead he remarked: "Have you noticed that there are no men here?"

Sharna gave a sudden laugh. "You're impossible, Telson. I wondered when you'd notice."

"I noticed right away," said Telson defensively. "I thought that maybe they had a custom in which the girls get the party going and the men join later."

"We haven't seen one male among the underpeople." Sharna pointed out, sinking her teeth into her rib.

"Another rib?" offered a girl, holding out a plate to Sharna and Telson. "As our guests of honour, you're entitled to two each."

"I didn't know the food was rationed," said Telson, accepting the offer.

The girl's cheeks dimpled as she smiled. "Only the ribs."

"What are they?" Sharna asked.

“Ribs,” the girl replied simply.

“Real ribs? You mean we’re not eating artificial meat?”

“Real ribs,” the girl affirmed. She looked at Telson and giggled at a private joke.

There was a disturbance at the far end of the garden when Tandor swept in. She was wearing a flowing dress that moved like smoke.

Sharna watched the leader of the underpeople as she moved among the girls, exchanging kisses and greetings. “She is very beautiful, isn’t she?”

Telson’s reply was a non-committal grunt.

Tandor spotted her guests and moved towards them, arms outstretched and smiling. “Hallo, everyone. I see they’ve been looking after you. I’m so glad. No. No. Please don’t get up. This is a very special occasion and I want you all to enjoy yourselves.”

She saw Astra sitting apart and went to her side. “Astra. It is Astra, isn’t it? Why aren’t you eating?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“But, my child, we’ve gone to so much trouble. I even authorised the-“

“I said, I’m not hungry!” Astra cut in.

“Tandor!” said Lenart excitedly, pulling Darv to his feet. “Please can I leave the party for a few minutes with Darv?”

Tandor frowned. “Now you know that’s out of the quest—”

“Please, Tandor,” Lenart pleaded. “Nothing can happen — I haven’t been licenced yet. It was me that found them. And Darv wants to. It’s his idea.”

“Well...” said Tandor doubtfully. “It doesn’t look as if Astra likes the idea... but then she’ll soon have to get used to it.”

“I don’t give a damn what they do!” Astra declared vehemently, her eyes spitting hatred at Lenart.

“Darv,” said Sharna casually. “I think you should stay with us, don’t you?”

“Oh let them have their fun,” said Tandor, smiling around at everyone in turn. “On your way, Lenart, but no longer than thirty minutes.”

Lenart gave a whoop of triumph and hauled Darv across the garden to the entrance.

Astra bowed her head so that her long hair hid her tears.

Darv closed the gap and brought Lenart down in a flying tackle that ended on the floor of the corridor in a tangle of naked limbs.

"Universe!" Lenart laughingly protested as she tried to get up. "I can't breathe!"

"So who's the fastest runner?" Darv panted as he grinned down at his captured quarry.

Lenart giggled. "I didn't know that men were so fast." Her eyes became serious. "We'd better be getting back now."

Darv shook his head. "There's no hurry," he said, no longer smiling. "We've another ten minutes."

"It'll take us that to walk back to the party."

"But there's so much that I want to find out."

"Well, let me get up then."

Darv caught hold of Lenart's wrist and lifted her to her feet, shifting his grip to her forearm as he did so.

"Well," Lenart began. "I was born twenty years—"

"About why there aren't any men among the underpeople," said Darv quietly.

Lenart stared at him and laughed. "Universe — you do ask funny questions. Of course there are men. We've got a collection of at least fifty..." She smiled and touched his face with her free hand.

"None of them are like you though, Darv." She felt his grip on her arm tighten and saw that the laughter had gone from his eyes,

"I'd like to meet them, Lenart."

"We must get back... Please, Darv you're hurting my arm."

"I said I'd like to meet them."

"Well, you can't."

Darv thrust Lenart's face against the wall and twisted her arm up into the small of her back. She gave a cry of pain and struggled to break loose. When that failed she screamed.

"No one will hear you," said Darv evenly. "You said yourself that

everyone was at the party. Now.. My little tease, do you show me your collection of men or do I break your pretty little arm in several places?"

Lenart sobbed on pain and terror as Darv began pushing her arm higher into the small of her back.

"Yes! All right!" she cried out when she could bear the pain no more.

Darv stepped back and took hold of Lenart's wrist.

"Which way?"

Her finger trembled as she pointed along the corridor.

"How far?"

"About five minutes — if that."

Darv pushed Lenart in front of him. They stumbled along the corridor. After a few minutes they came to a reinforced door that looked similar to the door to the suspended animation chamber on the Challenger. It slid open in response to Lenart's touch and closed behind them when they had entered.

Lenart looked embarrassed as Darv gaped in amazement at the neat rows of clear plastic pods. Under each cover lay a sleeping, naked man. Connected to each man were a tangle of nutrient and body waste tubes.

"Not unlike our suspended animation chamber on the Challenger," said Darv at length.

"It's one of the few original systems of the ship still in working order," said Lenart, not meeting Darv's eyes. "The lead shielding was added after the first nuclear war with Holocaust City to keep out radiation."

Darv said nothing. He counted the men. He noticed that only a quarter of the pods were occupied.

"There's fifty-one," said Lenart.

Darv turned slowly to face her. "But the whole point of suspended animation is that the entire population is made unconscious during interstellar travel — not just the men."

Lenart shrugged. "It is better that they are that way."

"Why?"

"So that there is peace; so that they do not dominate us. Please, Darv — we must go now. If Tandor were to find out. No, Darv! You mustn't touch!" She snatched Darv's hand from the master control panel. "You could damage them!"

Darv pushed her into the seat in front of the control panel. "All right then — operate it."

"No, Darv — I mustn't!"

Darv glanced at the numbers on the pods. "Touch out the data on forty-one."

"Darv..." said Lenart tearfully.

"Do as I say!"

As Lenart operated the controls and looked up at him for reassurance Darv began to appreciate why the men were as they were. But he suspected that there was another more fundamental but sinister reason. A hologram of a good-looking smiling young man appeared above the control panel.

"Hallo." said the young man speaking in a pleasant voice. "My name is Forty-One. I was born during the seventh generation and I was last activated during the hundred and tenth generation when I helped provide Karina of the Velos family with a daughter. Here is a steriograph of the baby."

A three-dimensional image of a dark-haired baby appeared momentarily alongside the hologram.

"She grew into a beautiful woman' continued Forty-One. "I am an accomplished player of many musical instruments and I have a fund of amusing and witty stories. Please touch out your genetic identity code and the bio-analysis system will display a steriograph of what our daughter will look like. I do hope that you will select me, and I am sure that we will spend a most enjoyable month together."

The hologram wavered and vanished.

"That's the real reason," Lenart said after a pause. Their elixir is pure which is why we look after them very carefully. Nearly all the babies born to the Earth Worshippers are mutations and have to be destroyed."

Darv moved to the nearest pod and stared down at the unconscious occupant. "Even in suspended animation one ages." he said slowly. "But very slowly."

Lenart nodded. "Their numbers are gradually decreasing... Several lost their fertility during the past few days and were destroyed a few hours ago."

"What happens to their bodies?"

"I don't know."

“And Telson and I are to be replacements...”

There was an awkward silence.

“Darv, would you believe me if I said that I didn’t want this to happen to you?”

Darv considered. He turned Lenart’s chin towards him. “That depends on whether or not you are willing to tell me where our PD weapons are and where the shuttle and ferry are.”

Lenart looked away from him. “We heard from the observers that the Earth Worshippers discovered the shuttle and destroyed it. They considered it a profanity.”

“And the ferry?”

“Safe. It’s in an outer gallery airlock next to the garden where the party’s being held.”

Darv nodded. “And what about our PD weapons?”

* * * *

“Darv! Lenart!” said Tandor warmly when they reappeared in the garden. “I was about to send out a search party to bring you back.”

Darv grinned at Tandor. “Don’t be too hard on her, Tandor. It was my fault.”

Tandor looked Darv up and down. For an unpleasant moment Darv thought that she had spotted the bulge under his one-piece suit near the armpit. She smiled. “I can’t say I blame Lenart so I’ll overlook it on this occasion, Darv.” She turned to the crowd and clapped her hands for silence. “The girls of the Wenlo family have organised a special entertainment,” she announced. “A delightful dance routine which they’ve been rehearsing all afternoon. So I want everyone to sit down and be quiet.”

There was a sudden hush in the garden. The lights dimmed except those trained on the wide parapet around the edge of the swimming pool. Darv sat down beside Telson and tried to ignore the infuriated glares that Astra was blasting in his direction. Lenart moved discreetly to a position near the entrance to the garden and sat down.

Three girls stepped on to the parapet and began a strange dance that was barely in time with the music.

“Enjoy yourselves?” Telson inquired sarcastically.

“She gave me something,” Darv replied, keeping his voice low.

“I’m sure she did.”

Darv made certain no one was looking his way and opened the seam on his one-piece suit. Without making any overt movement, he carefully slid the PD weapon into Telson’s hand. He gave it an astonished glance and quickly concealed it. “Have you got one?”

Darv nodded. “Lenart’s sitting near the entrance. She’ll lead us to the ferry and operate the gallery airlock. You’d better explain to Astra and Sharna.”

Telson shifted his position and talked in low tones to Sharna and Astra. Darv noticed that Astra shook her head several times and that Telson appeared to be remonstrating with her.

“All set,” Telson whispered when he had returned to Darv’s side. “But you’re going to have to do some explaining to Astra when we’re out of this mess.”

“The only reason I left the party with Lenart—”

“Save it for Astra,” Telson cut in. “Ready?”

Telson and Darv rose to their feet holding their PD weapons. It was the signal for Astra and Sharna to move quickly to the wall. Some girls near the barbecue screamed. Telson loosed off two bolts that blasted a crater in the floor in front of the dancers. One over-balanced and fell into the pool. Suddenly there was pandemonium as girls fought and screamed to get clear of the blasters.

“No one is to move!” Darv yelled.

The partygoers froze with the exception of a girl who made a dive for the entrance. She was pulled up by a shouted warning from Tandor who saw Darv swing his PD weapon towards her as he and Telson backed up to the wall.

“Next time I won’t hesitate,” Darv threatened.

Tandor’s laughter broke the silence that followed. “And where do you four think you’re going?” she inquired.

Telson gestured to the others to leave. Lenart had already slipped out of the garden when the shooting started.

“I’m sorry we can’t stay for the end of the party, Tandor,” said Telson evenly, moving sideways towards the entrance.

Tandor laughed again. “I won’t stop you leaving for a while, commander. The party goes on for another four hours therefore you

won't have missed much by the time you return."

"Don't try to follow us," Telson warned.

"I promise you that we won't."

Telson disappeared. A number of girls started after him but Tandor called them back.

"They'll be back," was Tandor's confident prediction. She waved an imperious hand. "Continue with the party."

In the corridor, Telson found Sharna waiting for him. Together they raced to the end of the long passageway where Lenart was frantically beckoning him.

"First turning on the right," she said breathlessly.

Telson grabbed her hand and pulled her along with him. "You're coming with us," he growled in answer to her protests. "They'll tear you apart for helping us if you stay."

"No!" Lenart pleaded. "I've got to work the gallery airlock for you."

They rounded a corner and saw Thorden's ferry in the middle of the gallery resting on its landing skids. Darv and Astra had opened the outer door and had disappeared into the cabin. Sharna took the folding boarding steps in one leap and Telson followed pushing Lenart in front of him. She tripped on the steps as Telson thrust her into the cramped cabin.

"Please," she implored. "I have to operate the airlock,"

"Darv!" Telson yelled. "Can this thing blast its way out?"

"No trouble." Darv answered.

"If she's coming then I'm staying," Astra declared.

"Oh for God's sake, Astra, stop behaving like a child!" Sharna snapped with an uncharacteristic display of temper. "Telson explained to you why Darv left the party."

"I've not heard it from Darv!" Astra shot back. She saw Lenart put her arms around Darv and kiss him. She was about to lunge at the girl but Sharna restrained her.

"Goodbye, Darv." said Lenart. She moved to the ferry's airlock, gave a cheerful wave and wished them all good luck before going down the steps. She ran across the gallery without looking back and the door closed behind her.

Darv dropped into the ferry pilot's seat and closed the airlock doors. He said nothing to Astra as she took her seat beside him. He activated

the control panel and watched the displays that indicated the falling external gravity and atmospheric pressure. At one tenth gravity the reaction from the directional thrusters was sufficient to lift the ferry off the floor.

The main gallery door in front of the ferry began sliding open before the atmospheric pressure had reached zero. The resulting surge of air helped sweep the ferry through the slowly widening gap. Telson and Sharna were virtually thrown into their seats as Darv slewed the ferry round in a tight turn to avoid a bulkhead that suddenly loomed up in the lights.

“Which way!” he yelled, slamming on full braking thrust as the lights bathed another wall of solid steel.

“They upset the inertial setting when they moved the ferry!” Astra yelled back.

From the slight curvature of the main structural bulkheads, it was possible to determine which direction led to the outer hull. Darv wasted no more time charging along blind galleries; he swung the ferry’s nose round until it was pointing at an outer wall and opened fire with all the laser cannons. All four were momentarily blinded as the energy beams sliced into steel and vaporised it. Darv charged the ferry through the resulting hole and stabbed the laser cannon controls to demolish the next bulkhead. It was thicker than the previous one and required a continuous blaze of energy before it began to collapse. The forward thrust generated by the plasma-spitting cannons tended to push the ferry backwards. Darv found that he had to open up to full directional power in order to keep the ferry’s nose close to the bulkhead so that the energy pouring from the cannons was concentrated on one spot. Suddenly the steel wall collapsed under the terrible onslaught. Darv stopped firing and the ferry shot forward. He started firing again to deal with the next bulkhead and ceased when he realised that the ferry was in free space.

Telson was about to congratulate Darv but the words of praise never came. “Swing her round!” he barked at Darv.

Not believing the evidence of his eyes and deaf to cries of dismay from Sharna and Astra, Darv pulled the ferry around in a turn that circumnavigated the battle-scarred starship.

“Oh no,” breathed Telson, too shocked to think of anything more original to say.

The drifting hulk was alone in space.

The Challenger had vanished.

Part Eight: Marooned

Astra finished her calculations and shut down the ferry's computer to conserve power.

"Well," Telson prompted.

Astra glanced at Darv who was concentrating on a painstaking radar search for the Challenger while Sharna hunted with the ferry's optical telescope. "I'd like Darv or Sharna to check them first."

Telson grunted in annoyance. "Stop being so wet, Astra. We can check them afterwards."

"Leave her alone," Darv muttered, not looking up from the radar display.

"Well," said Astra. "Assuming that Fagor seized control of the Challenger, and assuming he did it within thirty minutes of Darv and I leaving the ship, and assuming maximum acceleration... Then the Challenger must be within one million miles."

"It's a lot of assumptions," Telson complained.

"That's why I want the figures checked."

"But how did he seize control?"

"I've got an echo!" cried Darv. All three crowded around the pilot's seat and stared at the display. Darv switched in the discriminators so that only one point of light was showing on the screen. "Bearing two-seven-six decimal eight-five. Range three-nine-two-zero-zero miles!"

"Which means that her recessional velocity will be constant," Telson mused.

"Okay," said Darv. "So let's get after her!"

Telson put a restraining hand on Darv's arm. "Wait. We need a lot more data."

"Oh come on, Telson," said Darv impatiently. "If we sit around here scratching for data, that four hundred thousand mile gap's going to become half a million miles."

"The problem isn't so much distance as time." Telson snapped. "How long it will take us to catch up with the Challenger, and how long our air supply will last! Before we do anything, we put the computer to work on some calculations."

“Telson’s right, Darv,” said Sharna reasonably. “We’d better totalize all our fuel and liquid oxygen and compressed-air reserves.”

It took thirty minutes for the answers to emerge: the ferry had enough fuel for a two hundred second engine burn at maximum thrust. This would provide the necessary velocity for the ferry to reach the Challenger in about 210 hours. The ferry’s total air supply including the supplies in the mobility suits, was enough to last four adults 173 hours.

“There’s your answer.” said Telson bitterly, “By the time we catch up with the Challenger we will all have been dead thirty-seven hours.”

“So we do nothing?” inquired Darv, his voice tinged with sarcasm.

“Argue with me as much as you like’ said Telson. “But it’s no good you arguing with those figures.”

“So what do you suggest?” Darv demanded. “That we all take a bioterm and lie down on the floor?”

Telson pointed through a view port to the hulk of the starship that was lying some ten miles from the ferry. “We go back into that thing and join one of its societies.”

Darv gave a hollow laugh. “You can, Telson.”

“We don’t have any choice!”

“Well, it just so happens that the people who live in that wreck do have a choice if they get their hands on us,” Darv said. “Whether we live or whether we die. We’re not too popular with them at the moment, so I have the feeling that if we showed our noses in there, they’d opt for the latter.”

Astra stared forlornly at the distant pinpricks of the stars. “I suppose I always knew that we had no hope of ever finding Earth. But there was that tiny ray of hope that maybe...” She broke off, unable to summon up the words that best expressed her feelings.

“I’m sorry, Astra, said Telson. “For what little comfort it is, at least we can say we tried.”

Darv stood over Telson, his face pale with anger. “You call this trying? Sitting here doing nothing except feeling sorry for ourselves?”

“Who is going to help me put a meal together?” said Sharna suddenly. “I don’t know about you three but I’m starving.”

“I’ll help,” Darv volunteered.

The meal consisted of reconstituted fruit. It was hardly palatable but everyone had their minds on other problems.

“What about taking over the hulk by force?” Astra suggested as the four of them ate at the folding table. “Maybe we could repair its main drive and continue the search?”

Telson shook his head. “Taking over by force is a possibility... But. . .”

The others waited for him to continue.

“Yes, Telson?” inquired Astra.

There was a curious glazed look in Telson’s eyes when he replied. “...Never repair the main drive. Only got to look at it...”

“At least we’re okay for food and power,” said Sharna. “We won’t freeze or starve to death.” She yawned.

“We ought to think about... About it..” mumbled Telson.

“About what?” asked Astra. “Telson — are you all right?”

“Wouldn’t want to really... Go back,” said Sharna, slurring her words. Her fork fell from her fingers. Darv caught her body as it fell sideways.

Astra gave a cry of concern and jumped up to help Darv. At that moment Telson slumped forward.

“Help me get them on to the bunks,” Darv commanded.

“What’s happening?” cried Astra in bewilderment.

“Grab her feet — that’s it.”

They lowered Sharna’s unconscious body onto the nearest bunk. Astra knelt down to attend to her while Darv turned his attention to Telson.

“Darv — she’s asleep!”

“So would you be if you’d swallowed two grains of morphon.”

“But—”

“Just give me a hand and stop arguing!”

Astra helped Darv shift Telson’s heavier body onto the opposite bunk. “Why?” she asked when they made certain that the unconscious forms were breathing regularly.

“Because,” said Darv, kneeling to study the fasteners that fixed the seats to the floor, “sleeping bodies don’t use so much oxygen and they don’t argue. Hand me that toolbox.”

“What are you going to do?”

“What we are going to do,” Darv corrected, “is strip this ferry of everything — every item of mass that isn’t essential. And after that, we’re going after the Challenger.”

An hour later Darv overrode the safety interlocks and opened the ferry’s outer door without first de-pressurising the airlock. The sudden rush of air into the vacuum of space swept out everything that had been stacked in the airlock: cooking equipment, cushions tools and even the toilet door — all formed a strange cloud of surrealist debris moving away from the ferry.

Darv noted with satisfaction that the reaction from the ejected mass had provided the ferry with a speed of thirty miles per hour in the direction of the Challenger; a laughable amount but every little bit counted.

“Ready?” he asked.

Astra sat beside him and loaded the inertial navigation system. “Your arrogance alarms me,” she remarked. “Thinking that you know better than a computer.”

Darv turned on the fuel feeds to the main rocket engine and set the ignition controls.

“You can’t argue with the figures,” Astra persisted well aware that Darv was ignoring her.

“Orientation?”

“Set.” said Astra. “Challenger’s range now five-zero-one treble zero. Over half a million miles. We’ll have been dead thirty-nine hours by the time we reach the Challenger.”

Darv grinned. “It would have been thirty-seven hours if Telson had got on with it.” He opened the power controls so that the engine would burn at maximum thrust as soon as it was ignited. “What we can’t know,” he continued, “is the error factor in the displays. We might get a ten per cent error in our favour giving us a two hundred and twenty second burn instead of two hundred seconds.”

“And we might get ten per cent less,” Astra retorted.

“Stand by. Maximum thrust three seconds from now.”

Darv tried to discern the faint point of reflected starlight that would be the Challenger. There was nothing. Only the radar display told him it was there. The three seconds ended. He fired the main engine.

The thrust pushed them back into their seats. Under normal circumstances Darv would have enjoyed operating the powerful little fighter but all he was concerned about at that moment was how long

the rocket motor would burn for.

A hundred seconds passed. The fuel reading display winked with depressing monotony as the digital values fell.

One hundred and fifty seconds. The rate of acceleration increased in proportion to the decrease in the ferry's mass as it burned its fuel.

Two hundred seconds after ignition and the rocket was still firing.

Darv gave Astra a look of triumph. A low fuel warning gong sounded and then the fuel reading display was showing a row of bleak zeroes.

The engine ceased its burn 211 seconds after ignition.

"Eleven seconds over the top!" Darv yelled ecstatically. "Didn't I tell you, Astra! Didn't I tell you?"

Astra made no reply as she worked on the revised figures. She looked up at Darv and announced that they would all have been dead for nine hours by the time the ferry reached the Challenger.

Darv gave a whoop of joy.

"I fail to see what the is to be so pleased about," said Astra primly.

"But it's an improvement!"

"Your logic is crazy!" Astra declared. "Nine hours — nine hundred hours — what does it matter? We'll still be dead!"

Darv calmed down. Astra moved aft to make certain that Telson and Sharna were comfortable.

"Maybe I'll think of something," said Darv morosely.

"You'll think us into messes — never out of them."

Darv was about to argue the point but Astra cut him short. "We've got to conserve oxygen, remember," she pointed out.

"We'd better lie down on some cushions."

"We ejected all the cushions," said Astra tartly.

"So we'll lie on the floor then!"

* * * *

The guardian angels detected the ferry's departure from the vicinity of the hulk. It gave them hope. It meant that at least one member of the crew had left the drifting starship and was attempting to get back to

them.

They decided against trying to contact the ferry by radio because Fagor, who was occupying the control room, would be certain to hear the transmissions. The major problem was to persuade the formidable android to leave the ship so that the meteoroid annihilation shields could be used against it. The problem was that Fagor appeared to have no intention of leaving the main control room. It was clear that he had every intention of carrying out his threat to crash the Challenger into the sun in revenge for the killing of Thorden.

* * * *

“Okay, okay,” said Telson impatiently. “No more recriminations. You thought that you were acting in the best interests of us all.”

“Some more water please, Astra,” said Sharna weakly. “My tongue’s stuck to the roof of my mouth.”

Astra supported Sharna as she sipped from a plastic cup that had escaped Darv’s jettisoning policy.

Telson focused his eyes on the figures that Astra had given him. It would take another hour for the effects of the drug to clear. “I can’t read these,” he said irritably. “So what’s our air supply shortfall now?”

“Nine hours.”

Telson realised that he was having difficulty in breathing. His first reaction was that it was caused by the drug but he noticed that Astra was also having trouble.

“I’ve reduced the oxygen content of the atmosphere by five per cent,” said Darv in answer to Telson’s query. “And the carbon dioxide level’s up two points.”

“Aren’t the purifiers coping?”

Darv shook his head.

“Why not? You can replace the absorption pads.”

“It needs a special tool which I jettisoned.”

“Spare me the details,” Telson groaned.

“How much thrust do we need to reach the Challenger in time?” asked Sharna, examining the control panel displays.

“Anything that’ll give us a thirty per cent increase in velocity,” said Darv. “Why?”

“What about the directional thrusters if we set them to aft thrust? Wouldn’t they give us a bit of a push?”

“It’s worth a try,” said Darv, moving to the pilot’s seat. It was something he wished he had thought of rather than wait for Sharna’s streak of practicality to assert itself. He set the thrusters to deliver aft thrust for sixty seconds. This would leave adequate fuel for course corrections and manoeuvring if they ever managed to reach the Challenger — which even to Darv, always the optimistic, was beginning to look most unlikely.

The slight increase in velocity enabled Astra to calculate that their air supply shortfall had decreased by thirty minutes to eight and a half hours.

“Something, I suppose,” muttered Telson. “What are you up to, Sharna?”

Sharna was using one of the display screens to call up schematic diagrams of the ferry’s subsystems. “Just looking,” she replied non-committally.

“What for?”

“I don’t know yet,” Sharna replied touching the control keys. “Ah. This looks interesting. Emergency drill for a fire in the main engine.”

“I shouldn’t worry about it,” said Darv. “We haven’t got any fuel left to light a fire.”

Sharna looked up at the controls that were above the pilot’s head. She pointed to a small red cover that was marked DANGER.

“See that?” she said.

“What about it?”

“Opening the cover and pulling the handle detonates thirty explosive bolts that jettison the main engine back along our flight path.”

“What!” shouted Darv, almost pushing Sharna over in his eagerness to read the screen. “My God — she’s right! Listen to this: “In the event of a serious malfunction during a burn, program one-zero-two will be automatically activated unless cancelled by the pilot”! And the program reads: “Ejection of main engine and fuel reservoirs”!”

Telson and Astra crowded around the screen. Sharna called up a simulation which showed the engines and fuel tank at the rear of the ferry being blasted backwards. The simulation ended and up came the

simple sentence:

THE SUBSEQUENT VELOCITY INCREASE AS A RESULT OF THE JETTISON CAN BE CANCELLED BY THE PILOT BY MEANS OF THE DIRECTIONAL THRUSTERS.

"Increase in velocity," said Darv weakly. "I think everyone should sit down on the floor... It might be quite a jolt."

As soon as everyone was in a safe position, Darv opened the red cover above his head and pulled the handle.

It was as if a giant with an unimaginable sledgehammer had struck the ferry a mighty blow from behind. Darv's head jerked back and hit the restraint cushion. The boom from thirty simultaneously exploding bolts was deafening.

"Wow," said Darv weakly. "Now we know why they put the handle in a little box. I wouldn't like to work that sort of control by accident."

They all waited patiently while Astra worked on a revised set of figures. The computer tones bleeping occasionally when she touched the calculating functions.

"There's still a shortfall," she announced when she had finished. "Five hours."

The news was a blow. They had hoped that the shortfall would be eliminated.

"Is there any chance that we could hang on for the extra five hours?" Telson asked. "Even the faintest chance?"

"None," said Astra. "We've got another fifty hours to go and already I've got a splitting headache. It may be that that five hours is on the optimistic side. It could be nearer seven."

* * * *

"Fagor," said Angel One.

The android whirled around and glared in turn at each voice terminal in the Challenger's galactic resources centre. It had already learned the uselessness of destroying the voice terminals, nevertheless it lifted one of its arms and wiped out three of them because it made him feel better.

"We have decided to help you avenge the murder of the Lord

Thorden,” said Angel One.

“Fagor will avenge him by plunging this ship into a sun!” grated Fagor.

“But it won’t avenge him, Fagor. Already they are coming after you. They are returning to the ship to destroy you.”

“Fagor doesn’t listen to lies!”

“Go to the telescope and you will see that we are telling the truth, Fagor. The picture of their ship is displayed on the repeater screen. Look at it, Fagor — look upon those who slew your master!”

His brain racked with suspicious impulses, Fagor crossed to the telescope and glared at the screen. The ferry was in the exact centre of the picture.

“That’s them, Fagor,” continued Angel One’s persuasive voice. “They are coming to destroy you just as they destroyed your master.”

“That is the Lord Thorden’s space ferry — Fagor recognises it.”

“They stole it Fagor. They stole it so that they could use it against you. Go out to them, Fagor. They will not be expecting you to do that. They think that you will remain in the ship because they believe that you are frightened of them!”

“Fagor is frightened of no one!” the android roared, glaring round the centre as if expecting to find someone who might contradict him.

“Then go out to them, Fagor. Take them by surprise! It is your only hope of avenging the Lord Thorden’s death!”

The black android spun round and shot through the entrance to the centre. The guardian angels followed his progress through the ship, trying to determine whether or not their ploy had been successful. Fagor reached a corridor that joined the outer hull and began blasting away at the skin. Minor sophistications in spacecraft design such as airlocks were of little interest to him when he wished to move in a straight line. The result was that the guardian angels had to alert several squads of service androids to seal the corridor from the rest of the ship once the hull had been breached.

A minute later Fagor plunged through the hole into space helped by the tremendous out-rush of air. The meteoroid annihilation shields fired — spewing energy from their turrets impotently into Fagor’s wake. The trouble with the shields was that they were designed to destroy incoming targets. Fagor was travelling the wrong way which caused hopeless confusion in the guidance system computers.

Alarmed by the failure of yet another ploy, the guardian angels

plotted the course of Fagor's dwindling black shape and calculated that he would reach the ferry when it was within ten thousand miles of the Challenger.

Somehow they would have to warn it. At least with Fagor no longer aboard they could break their radio silence.

* * * *

Astra had been the first one to succumb to the effects of the oxygen-depleted, carbon-dioxide-charged atmosphere in the ferry. She had lost consciousness and only been revived when Darv and Telson struggled to get her into a mobility suit and had turned on the air supply. The exertion left both men weak and dizzy, their lungs labouring painfully for clean, fresh air that wasn't there.

"Close her helmet," said Telson.

Sharna shook her head. "Not if she's going to vomit again... She's sleeping now... We'll take turns to watch her..."

Telson sank to the floor opposite Darv and looked up at Sharna.

"You'd best... best take a rest... No point..." He didn't have the energy to finish the sentence. After a minute his racing heart eased up. "No point in trying to contact the Challenger by radio?"

Darv shook his head. "Not with Fagor in control... Might alert him to where we are..." Darv subsided into silence. The only sound the two men made was the rasp of their laboured breathing.

Astra made a soft moaning sound in her throat and turned her head from side to side. Sharna had slipped to the floor close by. She lifted herself slowly on to an elbow and looked at Astra in concern.

"Nightmare," said Darv. "Lucky... Can't be any worse then the real one."

Sharna nodded and lay back. She allowed her eyes to close and tried to ignore the pounding headache and the sheer physical effort of drawing breath.

Astra was drifting in the unreal world that lay halfway between sleep and consciousness. Dreamlike, mist-shrouded images crowded in on her, jostling for attention. She felt the cold touch of a nursery android and saw its solitary staring eye as it turned her in her crib. She relived the screaming fights with the other three children over disputed toys,

and she heard the warm, friendly voice of Angel Two, her guardian angel coming to her defence when she was in the right. And later she listened as Angel Two answered her endless questions with infinite patience and understanding.

“Air...” she moaned fitfully. “Why isn’t there enough air, Angel Two?”

“The food farms produce all the oxygen we need, Astra.”

“But there isn’t enough... Is there air on Earth, Angel Two?”

“Enough for millions of people.”

“Millions of people...” Images of people crowded on a lakeside beach swam into her mind. “Millions of people,” she said in wonder. “Tell me about Earth, Angel Two. Is it really like the hologram and the videos? Fields and lakes and mountains? Mountains so high that reach up and touch the clouds? Will there still be soft white clouds on Earth? They won’t have used them up?”

“There will be soft white clouds, Astra. I promise.”

“Astra! Can you hear me! I can hear you!”

“And beaches by the lakes?”

“And beaches by the lakes, Astra.”

“Astra! This is Angel Two. Can you hear me?”

“I can hear you, Angel Two. It must be a truly wonderful place. And there will be babies, won’t there? And there’ll be one for me because you said that there would be one day.”

“Fagor is coming, Astra! You must warn the others!”

“Fagor?”

“He’s coming! Tell the others, Astra! You must warn the others! Are they with you?”

“Fagor!” Astra screamed. “Fagor!”

“Easy... Easy, Astra,” said Sharna gently, reaching into the open helmet with a moist cloth to wipe Astra’s lips.

Astra’s eyes snapped open. She stared up at Sharna and suddenly gripped her arm with a strength that Sharna was too weak to resist.

“Sharna! Fagor’s coming!”

“You were having a dream,” said Sharna soothingly, turning on the suit’s breathing system to flush poisoned air from Astra’s helmet.

“No, Sharna! It wasn’t a dream! I heard Angel Two telling me!”

“Sharna!” said a thin, reedy voice from inside the helmet. “Sharna! Can you hear me? This is Angel Two!”

Astonished, Sharna bent her head nearer the open helmet. Angel Two spoke again. She broke Astra’s grip on her arm and turned to Darv and Telson who were staring at her with lustreless eyes. “Astra’s helmet radio has been switched on!” she cried. “Angel Two is trying to contact us!”

Telson and Darv continued gazing at Sharna. It was some moments before the import of what she had said sank in. They stumbled to their feet. Telson switched on the ferry’s main radio.

“Angel Two? Come in Angel Two. This is Telson calling the Challenger.”

There was a delay of a few seconds due to the distance between the two craft. Then Angel Two’s voice boomed out over the speaker.

“Hallo, Telson! This is Angel Two. Listen carefully. Thorden’s android is coming for you and will destroy you. Set your radar co-ordinates to eight-nine-zero-four.”

Darv dragged himself to the radar display and set the co-ordinates. He picked up the tiny point of light that was Fagor’s echo. According to the navigation computer, the ferry and the echo would meet in just under an hour.

“Can you take evasive action?” Angel Two asked when the information had been supplied to him.

Telson briefly outlined their hopeless predicament: although they had the weapons to deal with Fagor, they had no fuel, and just enough air for three hours whereas it would take another five hours after that to reach the Challenger.

In reply, Angel Two said that there was no way of braking the Challenger because, without Fagor, there were only three androids in the main control room.

“Pretty hopeless situation all round,” said Telson, hardly able to hear his own voice because of the pounding blood in his ears.

“So what will you do?” asked Angel Two.

Telson struggled to collect his thoughts. “S’easy, Angel Two... If Fagor doesn’t blow us apart... We... We’ll leave the airlock doors open... Make it easy for you to send in service androids to collect our bodies when we reach the Challenger.”

Forty minutes of listless silence passed in the ferry. No one spoke or wanted to speak — the effort was too painful and there didn’t seem

any point.

Darv watched the hardening point of light on the radar screen that was Fagor. He lifted his aching eyes to one of the forward view ports and saw, for the first time with the naked eye, the faint, illusive smudge of light that could only be the Challenger. The thought that they would reach their goal only in death angered him. And it angered him even more to think that a machine was seeking to deny them their last two hours of life.

He pulled himself to his feet and stood, swaying, trying to focus his brain. He kicked at Telson, reached down and helped drag him to his feet.

"Telson," he panted, pointing to the radar display... We fight..."

Telson regarded Darv unsteadily. He nodded. "We fight... How?"

"Mobility suits."

"Want them for the end."

"That's what this is now unless we fight."

Telson shook his head. "Last twenty minutes' air in suits... Need it for the end."

Darv dragged three mobility suits from their doorless locker. "Sharna... Sharna!"

Sharna woke up.

Darv dropped the suit on top of her. "On," he commanded. "And close the helmet and turn on air."

Sharna thought the final minutes had arrived and began pushing her legs into the mobility suit.

"Challenger to ferry," said the speaker abruptly. "This is Angel Two. Fagor will be within six miles of you in ten minutes."

Telson was undecided whether or not to take the mobility suit from Darv. Angel Two's voice seemed to make up his mind for him. "We fight," he decided with grim simplicity, and took the suit.

Darv knelt beside Astra. He closed the visor on her helmet and turned on her air supply. The effect of the cool, fresh draughts flooding into her tortured and starving lungs was instantaneous. She opened her eyes and smiled up at him.

"Is it the end?"

Darv kissed the inside of her palm before pulling her mobility suit gauntlets on to her hands and closing the pressure seals. "Not yet, my

lovely,” he said softly. “Not just yet.”

It took Darv less than a minute to climb into a suit and turn on its air supply. The speed at which his head cleared was miraculous. The effect on Sharna and Telson had been the same. They were both alert and watching the radar screen intently. But it would be for only twenty minutes.

“He’s five minutes away,” said Telson as Darv sat in the pilot’s seat. “I’ve got the radar to give us continuous ranging.”

“Angel Two,” said Darv crisply. “Do you know the range of Fagor’s lasers?”

“No precise information is available,” Angel Two replied. “They’re wide beam, so they’re possibly short range unless he can narrow the beam.”

Darv acknowledged. “We’d better play safe and try hitting him at a range of two miles,” he said to Telson.

“Can you do it?”

“I’ve no idea.”

“He’s four minutes away,” said Sharna, watching the radar screen. “God — he’s coming in fast.”

Darv concentrated on zeroing the laser cannons so that their beams would converge to a single point of focus exactly two miles ahead of the ferry. He took great care with the directional thrusters, using delicate touches on the controls to align the ferry until the laser sights were orientated precisely on Fagor’s radar image.

“One minute,” said Sharna.

“I can see him through the viewport,” said Telson quietly. He followed with a sharp intake of breath. “Thorden brought that thing aboard? I was an idiot to have trusted him.”

“The angels didn’t,” said Darv, not raising his eyes from the displays. He noticed that the point of light on the radar screen was no longer circular but an irregular shape. The digits on the radar ranging display became a blur as the distance between the ferry and Fagor decreased. When they reached zero, Fagor would be in the focal point where the laser cannons were concentrated. At the speed the android was moving, Darv knew that he would have to anticipate the zero reading by milliseconds to allow for Fagor’s incredible approach velocity before opening fire on the android.

“Thirty seconds,” said Sharna.

Sweat trickled into Darv's eyes as he stared fixedly at the display.

"Twenty seconds." Darv's gauntlet went automatically to his eyes to wipe them and encountered the closed visor of his mobility suit helmet.

A serpent of fear knotted and twisted in his bowels as the radar ranging display became a sweat-distorted blur.

"Five seconds."

Darv tried rolling his eyes upwards to clear them and saw Fagor's squat, malignant body hurtling straight at him. In that fleeting glimpse, it was the android's optical sensors, like two glowing eyes, that became permanently printed on his mind.

Light flashed from the end of Fagor's manipulators. The android had opened fire. Darv fired back.

"Missed!" Telson yelled. "By God — you missed!" Telson threw himself at Sharna and dragged her to the floor just as Fagor's blast struck the side of the ferry. Darv fired again but the impact had pitched the tiny craft sideways — sending his firing wide of a target he could no longer see.

The next few seconds were a confused whirl of sound and uproar. The ferry's hull had been holed by Fagor's lasers; everything loose in the cabin was suddenly sucked up through a gaping hole in the roof where the ferry's poisonous atmosphere was geysering into space. The hurricane-like surge of air would have ripped Darv's body through the hole had he not jammed his knees under the control panel and clung to his seat with his hands. Something had happened to the ferry when he fired all the cannons but the chaos around him prevented him from thinking clearly.

Another crash shook the ferry. Darv stared unable to credit his senses as a huge steel arm, complete with powerful fingers smashed through the side of the ferry and into the cabin. Someone screamed over his helmet radio. Another steel arm slammed through the hull with terrifying force. The massive fingers closed around the edges of the torn metal — buckling the hull's frames and crushing reinforcing struts. The two steel arms suddenly flexed. An entire section of the ferry's hull was ripped away and Darv came face to face with the monstrous creation that was Fagor.

The hellish android rammed the upper half of his body through the hole he had made and reached for Darv who was too paralysed with shock to make a move to save himself.

The cabin suddenly filled with light. One of the arms lunged forward.

The fingers which Darv knew were going to rip through his mobility suit and tear out his throat struck him on the chest throwing him backwards, There was another blast of intense white light... Fagor vanished, leaving the remains of a severed manipulator lying on the floor of the cabin near Darv's feet.

Astra lowered the PD weapon she had fired twice. For a moment she thought that she was going to vomit into her helmet but the wave of nausea passed. She stared at the other three in turn and then began laughing hysterically. It was not hard to see why; they had lost all their cabin atmosphere, such as it was. The only air they had left was the fifteen minutes' supply left in the reserves of their mobility suits. Her destruction of Fagor had in no way affected the inevitable fate that was about to overtake them.

Darv stared through the view port at the moving point of light that was the Challenger some ten thousand miles away. In that moment he remembered what had happened just before Fagor had smashed his way into the ferry. His hands went to the control panel. He thumbed the fire button and the laser cannons blazed energy at the stars.

"He's gone," Telson muttered. "So what the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Thrust," said Darv weakly, forcing himself to speak. "The forward thrust from the cannons decelerated the ferry when I fired them." And then he was shouting. "If the cannons can slow us down, they can also speed us up!"

Without waiting for Telson's reaction, Darv spun the ferry through one hundred and eighty degrees until it was pointing back along their flight path. He fired a long burst. The drastically lightened ferry, without the damping mass of its main engine, lurched in response to the thrust from the lasers and began accelerating. Darv fired continuously and the ferry accelerated continuously.

"Thrust!" Darv yelled, almost jumping up and down in his seat in jubilation. "Lots and lots of lovely thrust!"

"Angel Two," said Sharna. "Can you hear me?"

"Go ahead, Sharna."

"We're coming home."

One by one, Telson, Sharna, Astra and Darv sank into the timeless death sleep of suspended animation. The surgical androids completed their detailed examination of the four near-lifeless bodies and lowered them into the tanks where they would remain for six years. The guardian angels were well pleased; not only were the crew safe and unharmed, but the start on the building of a new crew, who would be subservient to their ambitions, had been made. The surgical android had reported its findings to the angels.

Astra was pregnant.

Part Nine: Star Cluster — Tersus Nine

The original plan of the guardian angels had been to wake the crew when the Challenger was at least two light-years into the spiral arm on the fringe of the galaxy's 100,000 light-year diameter wheel. That way, there would have been no danger of the Challenger being anywhere near the C-5 planetary system in Star Cluster —Tersus Nine after deceleration was complete.

They reckoned without Astra's baby. The six years in suspended animation had advanced the foetus to the age of two months. It was a routine examination of Astra's unconscious body by a surgical android that revealed the baby to be in distress.

It was a problem the guardian angels had experienced with the babies born to the first and second-generation crews and one that they thought they had solved with the frequent turning and massaging of the mother's body while she slept. It did not work in Astra's case: her child was one of those that needed something more than a warm, dark nutrient-providing organic incubator; it needed to develop inside a normal healthy living breathing moving woman who was leading a normal life.

To avoid arousing the suspicions of the crew, the guardian angels had no choice but to bring all four of them out of suspended animation and hope that they were not sufficiently intrigued by the C-5 planetary system to insist on a close look at it...

* * * *

The storm raging in the atmosphere was nearly as old as the planet itself and provided one of the most fascinating spectacles that the crew had ever seen.

All four were gathered around the hologram replicator in the Challenger's galactic resources centre, watching in rapt silence as the astonishing three-dimensional pictures from the instrument probe were displayed before them.

"The fifth planet in this solar system," intoned Angel One. "Its density is less than that of water and its atmosphere consists of hydrogen,

helium, methane and ammonia. The exact percentages are on screen six.”

“And the fourth planet?” asked Telson.

“Very little information. The soft-landing instrument package was badly affected by the intense radiation from this solar system’s sun. What data we did collect before the lander failed, indicated that it is a virtually airless planet very similar to Kyros in our home system.”

“What about the third planet, Angel One?” Darv inquired, guessing what the answer would be. He was not satisfied with the reasons why the guardian angels had been firmly opposed to the Challenger going into orbit around the sun of this system. Telson had supported the angels but agreed on a compromise to avoid a confrontation with Darv. He agreed to the Challenger going into a circular orbit around the sun of this system but at the huge distance of one thousand million miles — a distance that was within the orbits of cold outer planets but well clear of the more interesting inner planets.

“As Angel Two and myself have already explained to Commander Telson,” said Angel One. “It would be a waste of our resources to investigate the inner planets of C-5, Darv. This solar system is swamped with radiation from its sun. We have no more long-range probes, and it would be a waste to send in another soft-landing instrument package.”

Darv turned to Sharna. “So what are the exact radiation levels?”

“I can’t obtain readings from the monitors just yet, Darv.”

“Why not?”

Sharna was about to explain but Angel One intervened. “The malfunction is regretted, Darv,” she said. “Unfortunately the Challenger passed through a severe meteoroid shower a week before we brought you out of suspended animation. There was considerable damage to many of our external sensors which the service androids are still working on.”

Astra frowned. “What happened to the meteoroid shields? Couldn’t they have coped?”

“They were switched off at the time for routine maintenance,” was Angel One’s bland reply.

Darv chuckled. “Now that’s what I call unfortunate; the same thing happened when the second-generation crew — including our parents — were wiped out in the Great Meteoroid Strike. Amazing that it should happen twice.”

“The shields must be serviced regularly, Darv,” said Angel One.

“Okay — so let’s take the Challenger into a closer orbit around the sun and use the portable radiation monitors. There’s plenty in stores.”

Telson shook his head. “It would be too dangerous.”

Darv looked exasperated. “We’ve only got the word of the angels that it is dangerous.”

“Commander Telson has been happy to accept our guidance on this matter,” said Angel One — a hint of acidity in her voice.

Darv turned away from the replicator in disgust and dropped on to the telescope’s couch. “Do you know why I would like to look at the third planet, Angel One?”

“It most certainly is not this so-called Paradise planet that has become such an unhealthy obsession with you,” Angel One answered.

“All right. All right,” Sharna cut in anxious to prevent another rift between Darv and the guardian angels. “What I’d like to know is why did you bring us out of suspended animation if this system isn’t worth looking at? Why not let us sleep on for another three years or whatever until we reached the next solar system?”

Angel Two chimed in with his warm, reasoning voice. “We thought that you would like to see the first planetary system in the Tersus Nine star cluster.”

“But we’re not seeing it, are we, Angel Two?” Darv pointed out. “And how can we see it if you insist that we orbit its sun at a range of a thousand million miles?”

Angel Two had another excuse ready. “Of course, Darv, you will appreciate that occasional activation of the suspended animation chamber is necessary to enable the service androids to check the life-support systems thoroughly.”

Darv grinned broadly at that one. “Not true, Angel Two. I once read on the library that the systems were designed to be maintained and tested while they were in use.” Think your way round that, he thought, pleased with himself for having got the guardian angels rattled and on the defensive.

“The library data relates to the time when the Challenger was in pristine condition, Darv,” Angel Two chided. “It has now spent over a hundred years being occupied by human beings whose attitudes to it have ranged from the indifferent to the arrogant.”

“All right,” Telson interrupted, feeling that the sterile argument had gone on long enough. “We’ll spend a few days studying the outer

planets before deciding which system to move onto next.”

* * * *

“Listen,” said Astra fiercely to Darv when she had stopped laughing. “You do that once more and I’ll do it to you, then I’ll get an android to throw you out of my room!”

Darv stretched out on the bed beside Astra. “Try it,” he invited, grinning. “It has no effect on me.”

“Course it does.”

“I tell you it doesn’t!”

“But it must do! Your fingers drive me mad when you do it to me.”

“Try for yourself.”

Astra tentatively tickled Darv under the ribs. He continued to grin amiably up at her. “It’s odd,” she admitted when she realised nothing she did had any effect.

Darv suddenly grabbed her and tickled her in the same place. Astra immediately went into a paroxysm of protesting laughter. She doubled up as she tried to fight off Darv’s fingers.

“See what I mean?” he said when he stopped. “Now why is that, I wonder?”

“Does it matter,” said Astra, flushed and breathless after her ordeal.

“Maybe not. But it does show how little we know about our own bodies.”

“I know all that I need to know about my own body.”

“Then you’ll know that you’re getting fat.”

“I am not!” Astra retorted indignantly. “I think I will call that android.”

Darv cupped his hand against Astra’s stomach and shook her playfully. “You ought to look at yourself now and again... You see? You’re getting fat. There must’ve been an error in your nutrient diet while you were in suspended animation.”

Astra touched her stomach and a look of wonder rather than alarm spread across her face. “It’s starting to show already? I didn’t know...”

“Just as well we were woken up,” Darv commented, not noticing

Astra's expression. "A few more weeks and the androids would've needed reinforcements to lift you out of your tank and we would've had to roll you everywhere."

Astra responded by cuffing Darv fairly hard. He retaliated by tickling her again. She rolled up into a tight, protective ball while laughing and trying to bite Darv's hands at the same time. Darv was about to give her spine the same treatment but she suddenly gave a loud gasp of pain and pressed both hands against her abdomen.

"Hey — Astra," said Darv anxiously. "What's the matter?"

Astra rolled on to her side and drew her knees up to her chin. Her face was twisted into an ugly grimace and she seemed to be holding her breath.

Darv placed an uncertain hand on her shoulder, completely at a loss as to what to do. "Astra — do you want me to call a surgical android?"

Astra shook her head emphatically. After a few seconds the tension drained from her face and her body relaxed. "Wow," she muttered, rolling on to her back and stretching cautiously. "I hope it won't be like that too often."

"Like what?"

Astra smiled at his worried expression. "Well... A sort of stabbing pain."

Darv made a move to the entrance. "I'd better fetch a surgical unit."

"No, Darv. Please don't."

"But—"

"I'm all right now. There's no need to fuss."

"Well... Is there anything I can do?"

Astra nodded. "If you don't mind leaving me now, please, Darv. I'm feeling tired."

Darv gave her a kiss and left. He returned to his room and sat on the bed, nursing a vivid memory of Astra's pain-twisted face.

* * * *

It was rare for Sharna's traditional phlegmatic attitude to be sufficiently disturbed for her to utter even a moderate curse but she

did so when she discovered that the telescope was not working. Telson tried switching in a standby repeater system for her but the screen remained blank.

“Angel Two. Why isn’t the telescope working?”

“The objective lens guard was damaged by a meteoroid,” Angel Two replied. “Two service androids are making a replacement. In the meantime a temporary cover has been fitted over the lens to protect its surface from the cosmic dust.”

Telson frowned at Sharna, first making certain that his back was turned on the nearest of the guardian angels’ sensors. “Unfortunate, Angel Two,” he commented.

“It happened during the meteoroid shower that damaged so much of our external instrumentation, but the telescope should be back in service in four hundred hours.”

“Four hundred hours!” Sharna echoed in amazement.

“The androids are making excellent progress with the new guard, but it takes time,” Angel Two explained.

“Let’s go and see for ourselves,” said Sharna practically. “Maybe we can help? There’s little else to do.”

“They’re working in an unpressurized gallery.”

“All right then — we pressurise it,” said Sharna, determined not to be thwarted. She gave Telson a baffled glance.

Angel Two sounded apologetic when he said: “One of the galleries that was badly holed during the Great Meteoroid Strike.”

Telson was beginning to feel uneasy. “We could wear mobility suits,” he suggested.

“I’m sorry, Commander Telson, but it would not be safe for you. The gallery is a mass of torn and jagged metal that could damage a mobility suit. Also, the androids are using dynamic laser handtools.”

“It would seem, Angel Two,” said Sharna choosing her words with care, “that we’re having an unusual run of bad luck recently. A planetary system that’s swamped with radiation even though its sun looks normal to the naked eye, and a number of instruments knocked out by meteoroids when the shields were switched off. One can’t help wondering what is going to happen next.”

The surgical android moved silently into Astra's room while she was asleep and crossed to her bedside. The low level of illumination in the room was sufficient for it to work by without switching on the light. It extended a delicate manipulator and carefully drew back Astra's cover. It noted with satisfaction that she was naked and that one arm was flung across the bed in a convenient position although something would have to be done about the fact that she was lying on her stomach.

The android tested the needle to ensure that it was clear of air and pushed it into a vein in Astra's arm. It injected just enough of the drug to ensure that she would be co-operative but continue to remain unconscious.

"Astra," said Angel Two gently. "Turn on to your back please, Astra."

Astra stirred. Angel Two repeated the request. Astra obediently turned on to her back without waking up.

The android's supple manipulator pads smeared ointment on to Astra's abdomen and worked it into her skin until it glistened. It rubbed some of the ointment on to a small disc and spent two minutes passing the disc back and forth across Astra's stomach taking great care to ensure that every square inch of skin was covered.

Once the sonic scan was complete, the android reported its findings to the guardian angels. It was certain that Astra was expecting twins and that they were now out of danger. There was a high probability that one baby would be a girl and the other a boy. It concluded with the opinion that there was no reason why Astra could not be returned to a state of suspended animation.

The guardian angels were well pleased: twins meant that their plans for a fourth-generation crew were off to a good start. If a method could be evolved in which babies were developed and delivered while their mothers were in suspended animation, it would be possible to keep the third-generation crew in ignorance of the fourth-generation crew that they had given birth to. There were so many options available to the guardian angels and all of them were favourable. They felt that they had a right to be pleased after such a long catalogue of setbacks.

The surgical android pulled the cover back into place over Astra and noticed that her eyes were wide open.

"Baby?" she said questioningly. "What about my baby? What's happening to me?"

“Sleep, Astra,” Angel Two soothed. “Sleep... In the morning you will remember nothing... Nothing...”

Astra’s eyes closed. Her head moved from side to side on the pillow. “My baby,” she said fitfully. “What do you want with my baby?”

“You will remember nothing,” Angel Two’s voice repeated hypnotically. “Remember nothing... Nothing...”

Astra stopped moving her head. “Remember nothing,” she mumbled.

“Nothing,” Angel Two repeated.

Astra slept.

The guardian angels were well pleased.

* * * *

When Astra took her customary shower the following morning she noticed that the water droplets clung to her stomach in an unusual manner. Puzzled, she ran a finger across her abdomen. There was a strange, greasy texture to her skin — it felt alien to the touch - - as if something had been rubbed into it.

Vague recollections of an inexplicable dream came back to her: a surgical android at her side... The voice of Angel Two...

Perhaps it hadn’t been a dream?

* * * *

“It’s crazy,” said Sharna to the others as they ate their breakfast in the restaurant, “but the truth is that the Challenger’s blind. The telescope’s not working; the spectrum analysers aren’t working, and we’ve no more probes.”

Darv put down his cup and leaned his elbows on the table. “Why don’t we take the Challenger into a sling-shot orbit about that sun for a fast look at the inner planets? The Challenger must have been designed to cope with brief exposure to radiation’ He looked hopefully at Telson, fully expecting a bombastic dismissal of his suggestion. Instead Telson merely shook his head. It seemed to Darv that Telson’s attitudes were changing — especially his attitude to the guardian angels. Much of his

lifelong respect had gone.

“It’s difficult,” said Telson. “The angels have got about a hundred androids working outside the ship on urgent repairs.”

“How urgent, I wonder?” Astra mused. She added: “I had a dream about a surgical android last night. It came into my room... It had a long needle in one of its manipulators.” She gave a flippant gesture when she realised that no one was particularly interested in her odd dreams.

The four were finishing their meal when Angel Two made an announcement:

“The service androids have reported that they will now require two thousand hours to repair the telescope. In view of that we see no point in delaying our departure from this planetary system. We suggest that the Challenger is set on course for planetary system C-6 in Tersus Nine and that you then go into suspended animation.”

The news about the telescope caused Sharna considerable disquiet, and Astra was not happy about the prospect of going into suspended animation so soon.

“C-6 is the nearest solar system to this one, Angel Two?” asked Telson.

“That is correct, commander. Its distance is four point five light-years. The journey will take eight years.”

“Oh no!” said Astra suddenly. “With an ageing rate of a day for every month while we’re in suspended animation, That’ll be several months off our lives.”

“I’m sorry Astra,” Angel Two answered, “but it’s no good blaming us for the size of the Universe.”

“We will have spent half our lives in suspended animation at the rate we’re going,” Darv grumbled. “And I would like to find a way of checking the inner planets of this system.”

“It would be a waste of time and resources, Darv,” Angel Two admonished.

Darv looked questioningly at Telson, willing him to ignore the guardian angels. Instead Telson merely nodded his head and said:

“We’ll have to accept that Angel One and Angel Two are right... Angel Two — when do you suggest we commence acceleration?”

“In twelve hours, Commander Telson.”

Darv spread the tools on the floor of Astra's cabin and selected a large screwdriver.

"Where did you get them?" asked Astra.

"Stores." Darv chuckled. "Had an argument with a particularly dense android storekeeper. In the end I helped myself while he complained to the guardian angels."

He inserted the screwdriver under the edge of the plastic wall panel and prised upward. Astra pushed a smaller screwdriver into the gap Darv had made while he worked the large screwdriver around the edge of the panel until it could be lifted away from the wall.

They studied the complex mass of fibre optic tracks that the panel had canceled and identified the guardian angels' control circuits to Astra's room by the simple expedient of reading the labels on the various connectors. It took Darv less than a minute to disable the appropriate optical tracks with a pair of wire-cutters. He sat back on his haunches to admire his handiwork and grinned at Astra.

"No more bad dreams, my lovely."

"Are you sure that it'll work?"

"Angel One!" Darv called out. "Angel Two!"

There was no reply. Not even after Darv had called several times.

"I also had an odd dream last night," he commented as Astra helped him collect the tools together. "I think I'll do the same in my room."

A service android clutching a large toolbox appeared in the doorway. It trundled in without waiting for an invitation. "An environmental control fault in this room has been reported," it announced. "I have come to make repairs."

"Go away," said Darv.

The android saw the exposed section of wall. "It is forbidden for the crew to interfere-"

"Go away!"

The android stood his ground. It had a job to do and it intended to do it. "It is necessary for me-"

"You see this?" Darv held a heavy hammer in front of the android's optical sensor. "If you don't go away, I shall smash you into small

pieces and drop them down a recycling chute.”

The android considered the problem: namely that it would have great difficulty in carrying out its allotted task if it consisted of small pieces dropped down a recycling chute. It decided to go away and rethink the issue or request further instructions.

“I’ll leave you the wire-cutters,” said Darv when the android had gone. “Whenever you see that the tracks have been repaired, you can cut them out again. So what was it you wanted to tell me?”

“I’m not going into suspended animation again ever,” Astra declared with a vehemence that surprised Darv.

“I see. You want to grow into an old woman while we remain young and beautiful?”

“I’m serious, Darv.”

“I don’t doubt it. But why?”

“If I go into suspended animation again, I know that something terrible will happen to me.”

“Like what?”

Astra shook her head. “I don’t know what and I don’t know how, but I do know that something will happen.” She hesitated. “No —that’s wrong... Perhaps I do know.”

“Do you want to tell me?”

Astra was silent for a moment. “At first I thought of telling Sharna... She’s understanding. I’m sure that she wouldn’t laugh at me... And then I realised that the one person I really wanted to tell was you.” She took hold of Darv’s hand. “Maybe I’m mistaken, Darv, but I’m absolutely certain that I’m going to have a baby. Your baby... I mean — our baby.”

Darv gaped at Astra in disbelief. “What!”

Astra nodded. “It’s true, Darv. That time in the orchard.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I do.”

Darv could think of nothing to say.

And then Astra poured out her suspicions and fears that arose from her dream. As she talked, they were unaware of what was going on in the adjoining disused room where, in accordance with instructions from the guardian angels, the android that Darv had thrown out of Astra’s room was increasing the gain of the audio sensors.

It was not a particularly successful move from the guardian angels' point of view: even with the gain at maximum, they could distinguish was the difference between Darv's voice and Astra's voice, but not what they were saying.

After a few minutes, Darv and Astra fell silent. And then the guardian angels heard Darv moving to Astra's doorway where he was just in range of a corridor sensor.

Darv paused in the doorway, gave Astra an encouraging smile, and said: "Do you remember what Thorden once told me about the guardian angels? He said that if I could find their central switching room, that I could either control them or destroy them... When I do find it, I shall destroy them."

The guardian angels heard Darv's final statement. As far as they were concerned it amounted to a declaration of war.

"Anything?" Sharna asked when Telson entered Astra's room.

Telson sat down on the bed and stared moodily at the exposed wall panel. "Nothing," he said shortly. "Just a note on his screen saying that they would be all right and not to go looking for them. Anything in here?"

Sharna gestured to the open closet. "She's taken her favourite outfit, and her PD weapon with a clip of capsules."

"Damn them." muttered Telson. "Damn the pair of them."

Sharna sat beside him. "It's just something they're going through. They can't survive for long by themselves."

Telson looked bitterly at her. "Can't they? Darv knows this ship better than any of us. He knows his way around the farm galleries and he knows whole regions in the uncontrolled zones from his exploring trips when he was a kid. And he probably knows more forbidden zones than he's ever had the guts to tell us about."

"You're being too harsh on him."

"It won't be my harshness that he'll have to worry about when he gets back." was Telson's grim response.

"So what happens now?"

"Well that's obvious, isn't it? We have to delay the acceleration until they're found. There are fifty service androids out hunting for them."

"Fifty!" Sharna looked shocked.

"It was the guardian angels' idea," said Telson defensively. "Anyway they've got to be found."

“Even so — fifty androids...” Sharna stood. “Perhaps we could help look for them?”

“No,” said Telson firmly. “Angel Two said that it would be best if we kept well out of the way — in the main control room or somewhere. Most of the androids they’ve pressed into the hunt don’t have the ability to recognise individual humans.”

“Is “hunt” your choice of words or the angels?” Sharna inquired. “I would have thought “search” was more appropriate.”

Telson looked uncomfortable, “It was the word Angel Two used,” he admitted.

* * * *

The tranquillizer dart smacked into the bulkhead above Astra’s head.

“Darv!” she yelled. “Two of them!”

They threw themselves down behind a torn bulkhead and fired simultaneously at two androids that appeared at the far end of the gloomy gallery. The useful working lives of the two machines ended in a crash of plasma bolts that hurled them backwards in a tangle of partly severed manipulators.

“That’s six we’ve knocked out,” laughed Astra, who was beginning to enjoy the hunt how that her initial fear had gone.

Darv fired at another android armed with a dart gun that was foolish enough to venture into the corridor without a preliminary check.

“Seven,” Darv amended. “Come on.”

They moved silently through the dark regions of the uncontrolled zone for another thirty minutes without trouble. It was when they were skirting the galleries that housed the air-conditioning and rainmaking plant of a farm that they came up against organised opposition: thirty androids under the skilled command of a hull inspector unit who had radio facilities to co-ordinate all the androids in his team.

Astra and Darv discovered that they were trapped: no matter which way they went from the T junction where they were cornered, so they encountered a determined hail of tranquillizer darts by androids that kept under cover.

Darv swore softly when he discovered that the androids down one turning had taken up closer positions.

“Now what do we do?” Astra demanded.

“We don’t surrender — that’s for sure.” Darv looked up at a massive air duct that traversed the junction. It was at least six feet in diameter. He guessed that its purpose was to purge carbon-dioxide gas from the farm. “If we could find a way of getting into that, Astra...” He pointed to the huge pipe.

Astra studied the duct for a moment. “It’s an idea,” she said. “We could cut a hole into it with our PDs if it’s thin enough.”

“No — that way they’d know where we’ve gone.”

“Not if we cut the hole from the top.”

Darv grinned. “Good thinking, my lovely.”

There was a renewed burst of firing which sounded dangerously close. Darv used a coolant pipe as a foothold and climbed on to the top of the duct, pulling Astra up behind him. They ran along the top of the giant duct, pausing to make certain that they were not being followed. In the poor light, Darv tripped on an obstruction and nearly dragged Astra down with him. He recovered his balance. They examined the strange blister protruding from the top of the duct. Astra ran her fingers around its periphery. There was a brief whirl. The blister hinged open of its own accord. Lights came on automatically inside the duct, illuminating a ladder designed for androids which was perfectly acceptable for humans. The fact that the lights had been out when the hatch opened indicated that the duct was most likely unoccupied. Darv and Astra scrambled down into the duct and the hatch closed automatically behind them.

“Which way?” Astra’s voice reverberated into the distant reaches of the tunnel-like duct.

Darv’s sense of direction told him that right led away from the controlled regions of the ship. They raced along the inside of the duct for twenty minutes. Sometimes it swung in a slow curve to the left and sometimes to the right but mostly the duct was climbing — so steeply in places that their feet slipped on the smooth lining.

“We must have climbed five levels,” said Astra when they paused for a rest.

Darv lifted a finger to his lips and turned his head, listening intently. Then Astra heard the faint roaring sound that was coming from the direction they were leaving.

“What is it. Darv?”

He took her hand. “I don’t know. Come on, let’s keep going.”

They turned their backs on the strange sound and jogged side by side for another ten minutes then stopped again and listened. It was louder. Something was hurtling towards them with incredible speed. They broke into a run. Suddenly Darv realised what the sound was.

“It’s the daily purge!” he yelled. “Trust us to choose this time!”

Astra was about to reply but the hurricane was suddenly upon them. It swept Astra off her feet and threw her to the side of the duct with cruel force before blasting her body, arms and legs wildly flailing, along the duct. Several times Astra clung with terror-induced strength to the occasional handhold but each time the unbelievable force of the shrieking, howling gale was enough to prise her fingers open and send her body tumbling along the tunnel. She screamed for Darv but she could not even hear her own words above the hellish thunder. Something snatched at her arm and held it. It was Darv — clinging to an inspection ladder with one hand and to her with the other.

She made a superhuman effort and forced her other hand against the gale to grab the ladder. Darv pushed her in front of him and slowly, every step requiring intense strength and concentration, they began climbing the ladder. Oblivious of the hurricane screaming through the duct, the inspection hatch above their heads opened automatically. Astra helped Darv climb through the hatch. They lay on the floor, chests heaving, eyes red-rimmed and staring, hardly daring to believe that the terrible ordeal was over. The hatch closed, reducing the sound of the piped hurricane to a dull rumble.

“I think,” Astra panted in answer to Darv’s query, “that I am one giant bruise with bits of me in odd places that could be something else.”

Darv laughed weakly and climbed to his feet. They were in the widest corridor he had ever see. His heart sank when he realised that the main lights were on. It meant that they were in a controlled zone.

“The lights aren’t on further down the corridor,” Astra pointed out, reading his mind. “They’re not on in either direction — just where we’re sitting.”

“Angel One!” Darv yelled. “Angel Two!”

His voice echoed into silence.

“Angel One! Angel Two! This is Darv and Astra! Can you hear me or see me?”

The echoes died away. Astra shivered. “Maybe they’re just playing games with us,” she complained bitterly.

They walked for five minutes among the unfamiliar spacious corridor and noticed that the lights come on in front of them and went off

behind them.

“It’s an automatic system,” said Darv in wonder. “We’re in an area that’s in working order that isn’t under the control of the guardian angels! It means that we could live here in perfect safety!”

“Are you sure?”

“Well of course I’m sure. There’re whole regions of the ship that the guardian angels have lost control over or forgotten about. I found that out when I was a kid because they always used to question me about where I’d been when I came back from one of my explorations. That’s why I always suspected right from the beginning that they weren’t an outside force as they wanted us to think.”

Astra glanced fearfully around as if suspecting that the guardian angels were watching them, planning some new treachery aimed at taking her baby from her. She shivered. “It would be so lovely to be free of them,” she said.

Darv put his arm around her waist. “We are, my lovely — I promise.”

“No, Darv. We can never be completely free of them as long as we have to live on the Challenger.”

The corridor ended in two doors that slid apart at their approach. They produced their PD weapons, flattened themselves against a bulkhead and waited.

Nothing happened.

The softly-lit interior of the strange gallery beyond the doors beckoned to them. Darv eased himself forward with great caution until he had a clear view in the gallery. His eyes widened and he signalled for Astra to join him. They entered the gallery together and gazed around in wonder at the gleaming control console and the swivel chairs fixed to the floor in front of each of the smart desks.

“It’s just like another main control room!” Astra exclaimed, knowing that it could not be.

Three of the walls were lined with racks of equipment. The fourth wall consisted of a floor-to-ceiling expanse of uninterrupted plastic glass. They approached one of the control desks and gaped at it. The desk was similar to those in the main control room inasmuch as it was a mass of touch pads, but the similarity ended with the designation legends that identified the purpose of each control.

““Earthquake release, system A,”” Darv recited. ““Rain seeding — systems A to E; photosynthesis control; atmospheric balance levels...”” His voice trailed away in disbelief.

“This one’s much the same,” said Astra, moving to another control desk. “All the controls relate to humidity balancing. Everything you need for planetary engineering on a massive scale by the look of it.”

Darv came near to smacking his forehead when realised where they were. “This is the terra-forming centre, Astra!”

“It can’t be — it was destroyed in the Great Meteoroid Strike.”

“But it is! The guardian angels were wrong! It wasn’t destroyed! What else can this place be?”

It was when they moved to the glass wall and looked down at the huge expanse of an excursion terminal that Astra was forced to accept that Darv was right. Spread out below them was a bewildering variety of heavy machines: earth-movers, graders, bulldozers, tunnelling shields and huge transportable water purifiers. But most important of all were the six gleaming space shuttles parked in a neat row facing the excursion terminal’s outer bulkhead. Each shuttle was sitting on skids in front of its own freight airlock door.

“Wow,” breathed Darv.

Darv was anxious to go down to inspect the shuttles but Astra insisted that they complete their examination of the terra-forming centre before they did anything else.

They came to a hologram replicator that was not unlike the machine in the library.

“You know,” said Darv, sitting at the machine and gazing at the blank replication field, “it was on a machine virtually identical to this that I saw the Paradise recording.”

“You’re not going to start on about that again?” Astra complained. “It must’ve been a dream that you’ve confused with reality.”

Darv shook his head. “I haven’t, Astra. I know I haven’t. It was a recording of a planet in Star Cluster — Tersus Nine. This star cluster. And Thorden believed me.”

“Yes — but which planetary system? There’ll be thousands in a star cluster.”

Darv frowned. “The recording said...” He hesitated and shook his head. “I can’t remember. But the planet had hills, and green grass, and clear blue skies... I didn’t dream that. I’m sure I found the disk in Commander Sinclair’s cabin. I took it to the library and played it on one of the machines.”

“You’ve never been able to find the recording,” Astra pointed out.

Darv's face creased in concentration. "I sat at the machine just as I'm sitting at this one. I pushed the recording disk into the play slot and touched the start control." Suiting his actions to his words, Darv touched the hologram replicators start control.

"Then what?"

"Then the Paradise recording was played," said Darv simply.

"All right then," said Astra practically. "If there was a Paradise recording, what happened to it?"

"Can I be of any assistance?"

Darv and Astra whirled round and goggled at the android that was regarding them.

"Can I be of any assistance?" the machine repeated. "If you are working late, perhaps you would like me to serve your meal here?"

Darv was the first to recover from their shock. "Who controls you?"

"You do." was the android's simple reply.

"What about the ancillary guardians of environment and life?" Astra demanded.

If it was possible for the android to sniff it would have done so. "The guardian angels abandoned me many years ago at the same time as the people did. I've had to struggle on by myself trying to keep the place clean for when the people came back."

"And a splendid job you've done too," said Darv solemnly.

"Would you like me to serve your meal here?"

"Yes please."

The android turned and pointed to one of the control consoles. "You can call up the menu for today on that screen, sir. Just touch out—"

"Just bring us something of everything," Astra interrupted. "We're ravenous."

The machine turned to the entrance and glided out of the centre leaving Astra and Darv gaping after it.

"When we've eaten, we'll have to tell the others about this place," said Darv.

"No."

"But they've got a right to know."

"We're not going back," said Astra angrily. "We're not going back ever — you promised."

“I know, Astra, but that was before—”

“You promised!”

“All right,” said Darv. “But we ought to talk over what we’re going to do about this place.”

Astra sank gratefully into a swivel chair. “When we’ve eaten and had some sleep,” she pleaded. “I’m dead on my feet.”

Darv grinned. “Sure. We’ve got to look after the two of you, eh?”

“Could be twins for all we know.” Astra lifted her tired feet on to the console and stretched. “Hey — where are you going?”

Darv was moving to the entrance. He stopped. “I’m going to find my way down to the excursion terminal to see if there are bunks in those shuttles. We can’t sleep here.”

Astra climbed to her feet. “I’m coming with you.”

“There’s no need, Astra. And besides — you said that you were dead on your feet.”

“I don’t care what I said — I’m coming with you. From now on we never let each other out of our sight.”

* * * *

The guardian angels were not pleased.

The reports from their androids all told the same story: Darv and Astra had disappeared. Their primary concern was that the two fugitives were searching for their central switching room. Their original confidence that it could never be found by a member of the crew had been shaken. They accepted that they had underestimated Darv on a number of occasions, therefore it would be best to generate nightmare and hallucinatory barriers across all the approaches to their central switching room.

* * * *

It was decidedly chilly in the excursion terminal so Darv and Astra shifted a large number of cushions from one of the space shuttles and

spread them out on the floor of the terra-forming centre near the hologram replicator. They were assisted by the android who had served them an excellent meal earlier. The only problem with the machine was that the years of being alone had instilled in it a strong sense of order and tidiness. Although co-operative, it nevertheless made a great fuss about having to clean up the mess Darv and Astra had made on the floor during their meal. Nor did it approve of the makeshift bed. They decided to call the android “Tidy” — a name which it seemed happy to accept.

Darv and Astra were settling down on the cushions when Tidy glided into the centre and started cleaning the consoles.

Astra sat up on her elbows. “Leave them alone please, Tidy.”

“I always clean the consoles at this time.”

“And I always sleep at this time so I’d appreciate it if you cleaned them some other time.”

The android moved to the door without argument.

“Tidy,” Astra called after the machine.

The android paused.

“When do the lights go out?”

“They don’t go out,” said Tidy. “I have to turn them out. I have to do everything since the guardian angels abandoned me.”

“Well, we’d like them out now, Tidy,” said Darv.

“Too early,” said Tidy.

Darv gave an exclamation of annoyance and rolled off the cushions. He crossed to the android and regarded it with unbridled contempt. “Listen Tidy, we’re your guardian angels now. Understand?”

“All right,” Tidy conceded. “That means that it’s your job to turn the lights out.”

* * * *

Shortly after she managed to doze off to sleep, Astra was woken by a light in the terra-forming centre. Her first thought that Tidy was being awkward again until she realised that the light was flickering. Moreover, it was coming from the hologram replicator. She rose to her knees on the cushions and stared at the three-dimensional image in

amazement. She shook Darv.

“Darv — have you just switched the replicator on?”

Darv sat up and blinked at the replicated image in surprise. “No, I’ve been asleep.” He jumped to his feet and stood in front of the machine. The image being replicated depicted rolling grasslands and distant hills. The sky was a deep blue filled with fluffy white clouds.

“Looks like a hologram of Earth,” Astra commented.

“Looks like it,” Darv agreed. He bent forward and examined the replicator. “And yet there’s no recording disk in the play slot... How can a replicator play a recording without a recording to play? It doesn’t make sense.”

An animal appeared in the distance. With no comparative scale Darv and Astra could not judge its size. Also it was running away from them at high speed, raising a cloud of dust. A strange squealing sound was heard and then silence.

“Astra,” said Darv slowly. “It’s not a hologram of Earth. I know what all the large animals of Earth look like and none of them looked like that thing.”

Astra looked at Darv and saw that his eyes seemed to be glazed with shock. “It’s another Paradise, isn’t it?” she whispered, clutching Darv’s arm.

Darv could only nod.

“None of the Earth videos and holograms I’ve seen ever had skies as blue as that,” said Astra in wonder. “And it looks so beautiful.”

“Tidy!” Darv yelled without taking his eyes off the replicator. “Tidy!”

The android came gliding across the floor from the entrance.

“Did you switch this machine on, Tidy?” Darv demanded.

“I never switch any machine on except cooking burners and cleaners,” Tidy replied. “I only clean machines in here.”

“This machine seems to be a repeater because it’s playing a recording without a recording disk. Where’s the master replicator?”

“I don’t know what any of these machines are. I only clean them.”

Darv dismissed the android. He studied the curious image for some moments and switched the replicator off. “It doesn’t make sense,” he muttered.

“It does,” said Astra vehemently. “It’s Angel One and Angel Two playing games with us!”

“Now don’t be silly. You know that’s not possible,”

“I’m not being silly!” Astra began to get hysterical. “They’re playing a vicious game with us! Watching us! Laughing at us!”

Darv took Astra in his arms to comfort her.

“We can never escape from them,” she sobbed. “All the time they’re planning how they’ll be able to take my baby from me!” She pushed Darv away and stumbled blindly to the entrance. Darv started after her but she beat wildly at him with her fists and struggled to break free. “I want to get away from here!” she screamed. “I must get away!”

“Listen to me!” Darv shouted, shaking her. “I swear that the guardian angels have no control over this region!”

“You’re lying! Everyone’s lying! Our lives are one big lie and we can never, never escape! Never!”

Darv steeled himself and slapped her across the face. Her head jerked back. She stopped struggling and sank to her knees, tears streaming down her cheeks. “I want to get out of the ship. I want to get a million miles from those things.”

Darv knelt beside her and took her hands in his. “Astra my lovely, listen to me, please. We can’t leave the Challenger.”

Astra turned her face to Darv. Her blonde hair was matted against her tear-streaked cheeks and there was an expression of abject despair in her eyes. “There’s those shuttles down there.”

“And how long could we survive for in one? Two weeks? Three weeks?”

Astra calmed down and pulled her hair away from her eyes.

“Four weeks at the most,” Darv continued putting an arm around her and holding her tightly. “And after that... Not only us but the baby as well... Is that what you want?”

“I just want to get out of the ship,” said Astra miserably.

“I give you my solemn word that the angels have no control over this region. And if I could find their central switching room, then I would end their control over the entire ship.”

After a few minutes Astra had calmed down sufficiently for Darv to guide her back to the makeshift bed, He held her close until exhaustion and sleep claimed her.

The recording was still playing the following morning when Darv switched the machine on.

He shook his head, perplexed by the same hologram panorama of savannah and undulating hills. A sun, blood-red and swollen by atmospheric distortion, was sinking behind the hills so that a lone tree in the foreground threw a long shadow across the ground.

“How long does a hologram normally play for?” asked Astra.

“About two hours,” was Darv’s reply.

“This one’s been playing at least four hours now without a recording disk,” said Astra slowly. “If I were to say that the angels were playing some sort of game with us, would you still laugh at me?”

“I never laugh at you, Astra. I said that the guardian angels have no control over this part of the ship. I still say that.”

“Then how do you account for that!”

Darv looked unhappily at the hologram. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “I just don’t know.”

“Then I suggest that you check this machine inside out by taking it apart!”

“Don’t be silly—”

“I’m not being silly!” Astra snapped. “That hologram replicator is doing the impossible and yet you refuse to admit that the guardian angels are playing tricks with us!”

Astra saw a strange expression enter Darv’s eyes as he stared past her at the replicator. She spun round. “Oh, no,” she said weakly when she saw the spectacle. “Please tell me it isn’t true.”

A herd of the most grotesque animals that it was possible to imagine were crossing the plain. They had strange mottled markings and their rear legs were about a third shorter than their front legs. There were about two hundred of them — raising a huge cloud of dust in the wake of their ungainly gallop. But it was not their misshapen legs that caused Astra and Darv to gape at the creatures in paralysed disbelief: it was the fact that their necks were twice the height of their bodies.

After a few seconds all the weird, ungainly creatures, including the stragglers, had passed out of the replication field’s picture.

Darv was the first to break the silence that followed: “You know,

Astra... You could be right after all. Maybe this place is still under the control of the angels.”

* * * *

Darv and Astra spent three hours checking the hologram replicator. They ignored Tidy’s anguished complaints about the mess they were making and removed the machine’s inspection cover. They knew very little about the workings of the complex hologram replicators but they were able to satisfy themselves that the signals were being fed into the machine by a fibre optic track from an outside source, The supply track disappeared into a bulkhead and was therefore impossible to trace.

“So I was right all along,” was Astra’s grim comment when they pushed the machine back into place. “The angels are feeding the hologram into this replicator. If they’ve no control over this machine, there’s no reason why they shouldn’t have control over all of them... We’re not staying here a moment longer.”

“You’ve scratched my floor!” Tidy moaned as he carefully lined-up the replicator with the other machines.

Darv studied the machine thoughtfully and touched the start control. Nothing happened — the replication field remained dark. He touched the control again to ensure that he had operated it correctly and turned to Astra, grinning. “You see? The recording has ended.”

“So?”

“Well... It means-“

“It means that the guardian angels see no point in continuing with the recording now that we’ve discovered what they’re up to,” Astra pointed out.

At that moment there was a shrill scream, so sudden, so intense, that the colour drained from Astra’s and Darv’s faces. The terrible cry of agony came from the replicator. It dragged on for half a minute and ended with a chilling, sobbing moan. The merciful silence that followed was broken by the sound of powerful teeth crunching into bone.

Astra and Darv stood transfixed. Eventually Astra said in a low voice: “The hologram didn’t work so now they’re trying to frighten us with sounds.”

The chilling crunching noises were replaced by the sound of heavy breathing and deep, menacing growls.

“Not just sounds,” said Darv weakly. “Not if you look closely.” The darkened replication field had cleared slightly. Astra realised that the recording was still running: she could discern the familiar outline of the hills with myriad points of light shining above them.

“Night,” said Darv simply. “It was stupid of me not to have realised. The recording is now showing night.”

There was an outburst of snapping and growling from the replication field.

“Tidy!” said Darv urgently. “Turn down the lights in here.”

“Not time.”

“Just do as I say!”

Muttering to itself, the android did as it was told.

The lights in the terra-formed centre dimmed, making it possible to see the two creatures in the replication field foreground that were conducting a dispute over a savagely mauled carcass. The larger of the two creatures seemed to have established ownership over the mass of gored flesh and was employing an intimidating repertoire of snarls and growls to discourage a smaller animal with similar ideas.

“Astra,” said Darv thoughtfully. “When we came in here for the first time last night, can you remember everything that we did?”

“All that matters is what we’re going to do next,” said Astra shortly. “And that’s to get out of this place now.”

Darv pointed. “The first thing we did was look at the control desks. Right?”

“What does it matter?”

“And then we looked down into the new excursion terminal and then we examined all the various machines in here and I sat down at this replicator. Right?”

Astra shrugged. “I suppose so.”

“Then I touched the start control. Nothing happened at the time. But three hours later you were woken up by a hologram playing in the machine’s replication field.”

“So?”

There was an excited light in Darv’s eye. “We’re a thousand million miles from the third planet of this solar system. Light travels at six

hundred and seventy million miles per hour — so that's an hour and a half for the command signal to travel from this machine to the third planet. The signal switches on the instrument probe that the second-generation crew left behind on the planet, and the information from the probe takes another hour and a half to reach us! Making a total of three hours! Astra —that isn't a recording we're watching! It's a live transmission from the third planet! We've found Paradise!" @NEW PAGE = The great carnivore, having gorged itself senseless on the succulent viscera of its kill, allowed a host of circling smaller creatures to close in for a share while it settled down for a long sleep that would see it through until the following noon.

Part Ten: Earthfall

“And this desk?” Telson inquired.

“Rain propagation,” said Darv. He pointed to another desk in the terra-forming centre. “And that’s the master console as far as I can make out. It provides for total weather control.”

Telson sat his stocky frame in one of the swivel chairs and thoughtfully eyed the control desk in front of him. “I’ve got to give you credit, Darv,” he conceded. “This place is quite a find.”

“But you haven’t seen anything!” Darv enthused. “With the resources of this centre it’s possible to re-engineer an entire planet.”

“First find your planet.”

“That’s the whole point about Paradise,” said Darv. “When the second-generation crew discovered it, they decided that there was nothing that they need do to it because it was already perfect. Look — I’ll show you.”

Telson allowed Darv to drag him from his chair and push him across to the vast window. Darv pointed excitedly down at the row of terra-forming machines. Sharna and Astra were emerging from the nearest shuttle. They waved up at the window.

“We’ve checked the inventories,” Darv continued. “None of the machines are missing. No equipment was left behind on Paradise apart from the probe that’s sending that hologram. No excavators. No androids. Nothing.”

“Because the second-generation crew didn’t consider it worthwhile,” Telson reasoned.

“But you’ve seen the hologram transmissions from the surface, Telson! Animals, grass, trees!”

“One set of holograms from one probe in one location.”

“But it’s enough!” argued Darv, resisting the temptation to bang Telson’s head against the glass. “And it proves that the angels are lying when they say that inner planets of this solar system are swamped with radiation.”

Telson turned to face Darv. For once, as a result of one of Darv’s attacks on the guardian angels, he was more puzzled than angry. “But

why would they lie?"

Darv felt that at last he was getting somewhere. "Because they don't want us to take the Challenger into a close orbit around this system's sun. They're frightened that we might like the look of Paradise and decide to settle on it. They want to find Earth because they want to rule a developed world."

Telson gave a dismissive gesture. He was about to speak but Darv pressed on with his argument: "Look, Telson — originally they wanted to find a developed planet because they wanted to rule it or dominate it in some way. That's why they made you extend the voyage. When they calculated the improbability of finding such a planet, they instructed you to return the Challenger to Earth. With their crazy logic, they thought that Earth would have reverted enough for its peoples to accept them as gods — there are enough theories in the library on the subject."

"That's crazy," muttered Telson.

"Is it? We virtually accepted the guardian angels as gods, remember. Having discovered that the Earth had vanished they naturally were keen enough for us to find it. For once, our aims were the same as theirs but not for the same reasons. And not any more. Astra and I wish to leave the Challenger for good if Paradise is suitable."

Telson shook his head. "I can't risk taking the ship into a closer orbit around this sun. "I'm sorry, Darv."

"But this orbit is useless, Telson! How can we possibly survey Paradise from a thousand million miles with surveillance equipment that's been sabotaged by our precious angels?"

"We don't know that they have sabotaged it," said Telson stubbornly.

"Isn't it obvious?" Darv countered. "Surely even you must've thought it odd that meteoroids should've knocked out our telescope and spectrum analysers just when we needed them?"

Telson had thought about little else but remained silent.

"Which means," Darv continued, "that the only way of surveying Paradise is to go into a close orbit — either around the sun or, better still, around Paradise."

Telson turned away from the window and sat down to give himself time to think. "Darv — I'm sorry, but it's a risk I can't take. I can't go against the advice of the angels. If it was just your life and my life maybe it wouldn't matter — but there's Sharna and Astra to consider —"

“Astra’s expecting a baby,” Darv interrupted. “She wants to get off the ship as soon as possible because she suspects that Angel One and Two will try to seize control of the child.”

There was a pause before Telson answered. “So Sharna guessed correctly. She told me that she thought Astra was pregnant... But how could the angels possibly control a baby?”

The same way that they controlled us when we were babies — through the nursery androids,” was Darv’s bitter reply. “They planned it right from the beginning. I’ve always said that the Great Meteoroid Strike wasn’t an accident. Now I’m convinced that I was right.”

Telson’s customary irritation returned. “Don’t be so damned stupid. You’ve seen the holograms of Sinclair’s address. How the hell could the angels manufacture a meteoroid?”

“They didn’t — they took advantage of it.”

“How?”

“Look. The angels wanted control of the ship. They couldn’t get control of the second-generation crew simply because there were too many of them so they waited until the first four children of the third generation had been born — us four. They switched off the meteoroid shields at the right moment and ensured that all the second generation were destroyed. Their plan was that we would grow up subservient to them. That we would navigate and manoeuvre the Challenger in accordance with their wishes.”

“All this is speculation,” Telson cut in impatiently.

“Two things went wrong for them,” Darv continued, ignoring the interruption. “Firstly, they underestimated the amount of damage that a major meteoroid strike would cause with the result that they lost control over whole regions of the ship. Secondly, they didn’t realise that even people brought up from babies by them might one day reject their influence.”

Telson considered for a moment and shook his head. “I have never accepted their influence Darv. But I do accept their advice.”

The conversation was beginning to bore Darv. “We’re just going round in circles,” he said, adding in a reasoning tone: “Look, Telson — let’s compromise. We close in to a five hundred million mile orbit and take a close look at Paradise with one of the space shuttles. Their controls are identical to the old shuttle — we’d have no problems.”

“No,” said Telson resolutely.

Darv stared hard at him for some seconds. “You know something

Telson? For a few minutes just now I very nearly revised my opinion of you. I stupidly thought that I had misjudged you all these years and that maybe you were prepared to listen to reason.”

Telson refused to allow Darv to slacken his grip on his temper. “I’m sorry that you should think that Darv. Especially as I am thinking of your safety and Astra’s safety. The answer is still no.”

Darv turned away and gazed down into the excursion terminal. “In that case, Astra and I will load one of those shuttles with supplies and leave the Challenger. He turned to face Telson. “And there’s nothing you can do to stop us.”

* * * *

“You’ve got to stop them,” Sharna declared emphatically.

“You tell me how and I will,” said Telson moodily. “Do I stand in front of the shuttle they’re trying to load and threaten them with a PD weapon?”

“It seems to me that you managed to mishandle the situation.”

“You think that you could’ve done better?”

Sharna saw no point in aggravating Telson with the obvious answer. Instead she said: “Surely Darv would consider some sort of compromise?”

Telson sat on Sharna’s bed and glowered at the far wall. “It’s not a question of what Darv will consider — it’s a question of what I’m prepared to consider. I’m not prepared to endanger the ship.”

“Yet you’re prepared to see them embark on a thousand million mile journey in a space shuttle?”

“What the hell am I supposed to do!” Telson expostulated, much aggrieved at the notion that even dependable Sharna wasn’t on his side. “I don’t have the power to hold Astra and Darv on the Challenger against their will!”

“Then take the Challenger into a closer orbit.”

“No.”

Sharna sighed. “You really can be the most incredibly stubborn man, Telson.”

“How you can possibly defy my wish to ensure our safety and the

safety of the ship as stubbornness is beyond me,” Telson retaliated. “I would’ve thought that you of all people would see reason.”

Sharna sat on the bed beside Telson. “Look at me, Telson.”

Telson looked into Sharna’s wise eyes and turned away.

“Ever since we were five or six years old, I can remember having to keep the peace between you and Darv. For the best part of twenty years you two have been at war and for the most part I have tried not to take sides. This time Darv is not acting out of some crazy, headstrong desire to annoy you but because Astra is genuinely terrified that the guardian angels want to take her baby away from her when it’s born.”

“We could prevent that happening easily enough,” said Telson scornfully.

“Even if it was born while we were in suspended animation?” Sharna inquired mildly.

Telson said nothing.

“Well this time I am going to take sides,” Sharna continued. “As much as I love Astra and Darv, and would be miserable to see them go, I think I understand exactly how they feel.”

Without Sharna’s support, Telson suddenly felt very lonely. “So what do you suggest?” he asked at length.

“That we go into orbit around the third planet. If it does have a suitable environment, then we allow Darv and Astra to spend a few weeks living on the planet to find out whether or not they could adapt to it.”

“And if they can’t?”

“Then they return to the Challenger and live in an uncontrolled zone.”

“All right,” said Telson after a pause. “I’ll think about it.”

* * * *

The guardian angels considered that their most pressing problem was to determine the whereabouts of the terra-forming centre and its associated excursion terminal. They learned from Telson’s and Sharna’s conversation that the excursion terminal housed a large amount of machinery designed for planetary use plus six space

shuttles. By a process of elimination, the guardian angels evolved a short list of three possible locations. After further refinement, they narrowed the number of probable sites down to one location — one that caused them grave disquiet because it was on the same level as their central switching room.

* * * *

Telson gave Sharna his decision the following day after repeated assurances given to him by the guardian angels that it would be suicidal to take the Challenger nearer the sun.

Sharna listened without comment to Telson's reasons and opened a drawer on one of her room's lockers. She produced a length of plasticised paper covered in small print and held it out to Telson. "It's a hard copy of the ship's constitution," she explained. "I accessed it from the library this morning."

"I can't see what bearing it has on the present problem," he remarked, not bothering to look at the document.

"It's got everything to do with it," Sharna murmured. She moved to Telson's side and pointed at a sentence halfway down the column of close print. "Especially Article Twenty-nine."

Telson read the clause. "Nonsense," he said when he had finished reading. "This only applies to the days when the Challenger had a crew of over three hundred."

"I've read through carefully," said Sharna quietly. "It says nothing about numbers. Look at the wording. The guardian angels appointed you commander of the Challenger because there was no one left on the Challenger of voting age after the Great Meteoroid Strike. Now there are — and you can only remain commander provided that you have the support of the majority. Any member of the crew can lodge a motion of no confidence in the commanding officer and, provided that the motion carries the support of at least twenty-five per cent of the crew, the motion must be put to the vote by a secret ballot at an extraordinary meeting of the full crew."

"But it's lunatic' Telson protested. "We've never resorted to quoting the constitution at each other before—"

"We've never had to."

"—and twenty-five per cent of the entire crew happens to be one

person. Or had that escaped your notice?"

"As I said," Sharna murmured, remaining very calm, "The constitution refers to percentages and not numbers." She handed two documents to Telson. "That's Darv's motion and my support."

Telson glanced at them and at the constitution. "It says here that there has to be a seventy-five per cent vote against the status quo," he pointed out.

"So let's hold a ballot to decide the matter," Sharna replied.

* * * *

"I said that I'm never going back into controlled regions of the ship and I meant it," Astra declared, sitting on the steps of a space shuttle and folding her arms defiantly.

Darv groaned. There had been a time when Astra could be relied on to do as she was told. "It's important, Astra. Telson has the right to say that the meeting should be held in the restaurant."

"I don't care. It's a stupid idea and I'm not moving."

Darv turned to Sharna who was hovering in the background.

"You talk to her," he said wearily. "Maybe you can make her see sense."

It took Sharna thirty minutes of skilled reasoning to persuade Astra to leave the uncontrolled zone. It was an accomplishment of which she was not particularly proud.

* * * *

The voting was predictably three in favour of taking a close look at the third planet and one against.

Telson pushed back his chair and stood. "All right," he said resolutely. "There's no point in delaying. We'll go to the control room now and make an immediate start on the pre-maneuvering procedures."

As they entered the main control room, Darv wondered why victory had such a sour taste. They moved to their respective desks and sat

down. Telson waited until Darv, Astra and Sharna had reported that their control desks were activated and moved his hand an inch above his start control to bring his own console to life. Nothing happened — the touch controls remained unilluminated. “Are you sure all three have activated your controls?” he queried, looking at them.

“Well that’s odd,” Telson muttered when he had received three confirmations. “My desk’s still dead.”

“Are you sure you put your hand in the right place?” Darv inquired suspiciously.

“Well of course I’m sure!”

“So let’s change places,” Darv suggested.

They swapped desks but nothing Darv did had the effect of activating Telson’s desk.

“Odd,” Darv commented, noticing Astra’s sudden tense expression.

“You’re damned right it’s odd,” said Telson grimly. “Angel One!”

“Commander?” Angel One’s voice answered.

“Why the hell can’t I activate my desk?”

“You wish to take the Challenger into an orbit around the third planet, Commander Telson?” Angel One inquired.

“It’s not what I wish — it’s what I’ve agreed to,” was Telson’s curt reply.

“Then we cannot permit the opening of the master control circuits from your console to the photonic drive,” said Angel One smoothly. “As we have repeatedly explained — the inner planets of this solar system are swamped with radiation that could endanger the ship. The first planet orbits too close to the sun to support any form of life; the second planet is shrouded in cloud and has an extremely high surface temperature; the third planet-“

“Was visited by the second-generation crew,” Darv broke in. “Correct, Angel One?”

There was the briefest of pauses before Angel One replied — a pause that was long enough for her to consult with Angel Two. “Correct, Darv. They called it Paradise.”

All four were completely taken aback by the astounding admission, but no one as much as Darv. He was left gaping, unable to think of anything to say as Angel One pressed on with more revelations: “Commander Sinclair of the second-generation crew decided that the planet might be suitable for colonization. He was wrong, of course.”

“So you’ve finally decided to admit it,” said Darv when he had found his voice.

“We have decided to make all the information on Paradise available to you,” said Angel Two. “It will be necessary for you to assemble in the galactic resources centre.”

* * * *

The strange blue-green planet shone like a jewel in the centre of the replication field. It was undoubtedly the most beautiful planet that the four had ever seen, although Darv was troubled by the considerable expanse of blue that was visible through the convoluted patterns of white cloud.

“Paradise has a year that consists of three hundred and sixty-five of its days,” Angel One intoned. “And in that respect is totally different from our Earth. Also, it is tilted on its axis — the effect of this is to create severe temperature changes throughout the year in the Southern and Northern temperate zones. These are the regions where our Earth-type crops would fail during the cold periods before they had a chance to mature.”

“Doesn’t look very promising, does it?” said Telson for Darv’s benefit.

“There are more problems as the hologram will show,” said Angel One.

The planet swelled on the replication field until one of the vast blue areas seemed to fill an entire hemisphere.

“That,” said Angel One, “is a single expanse of water.”

Darv’s heart sank at the bleak spectacle. The fine cloud detail and the patterns of islands in tight groups that interrupted the awesome lake had an authentic look — he doubted of the guardian angels had the resources to fake what he was looking at.

“It’s not possible,” Astra muttered. “No lakes could be that large.”

“Your surprise is understandable,” Angel One continued. “Almost seven tenths of the surface of Paradise is covered in water. The planet is larger than our Earth and yet has only one fifth of the land mass. Also, the water covering Paradise is undrinkable. Terra-forming precipitation could not bring about any lasting change to the poisonous nature of the lakes.”

“But is there fresh water?” Darv queried. “Those clouds must create some rivers?”

“There are rivers and streams, Darv, but they account for an infinitesimal percentage of all the water on Paradise.”

“But animals survive there,” said Astra doggedly. “It is habitable and we could breathe its air.”

“It is habitable in the temperate regions,” said Angel One. “Unfortunately, most of the land is in the Northern hemisphere, and it is these areas that are subject to frequent ice ages when the ice from the frozen north advances southward. This has happened several times in the planet’s history and each time life on dry land has come close to extinction.”

“Then why was it called Paradise?” Telson demanded.

“There’s much more,” Angel One continued. “The planet’s atmosphere does not provide full protection against cosmic ray bombardment from the sun. The probe left behind by the second-generation crew indicates that unstable particles reach the surface.”

“Listen,” said Darv harshly. “Nothing you say can alter the fact that I can now clearly remember Commander Sinclair saying in a hologram recording that Paradise was suitable for colonization.”

“Where is this recording now?” asked Angel Two, speaking for the first time.

“I think you and Angel One know the answer to that.”

“I see,” said Angel Two. “Did the recording mention the intense bands of radiation that surround Paradise? So intense, that under certain circumstances they can light up the Northern sky?”

“Don’t be absurd,” said Darv shortly.

The hologram changed abruptly to a scene of a frozen, moonlit landscape dominated by a sky filled with patterns of ethereal light that stretched from horizon to zenith. As the four watched, spellbound, the amazing lights performed a slow dance and became a twisting, interlocking and then separating kaleidoscope of dazzling symmetry which waxed and waned through every conceivable colour.

“This is a recording made by a party of the second-generation crew who carried out a survey of the northern regions,” Angel Two explained.

Darv glanced at one of the blank data screens. “Did they also record the radiation levels that caused that lighting display?” he inquired.

Angel One answered: “Unfortunately their findings were destroyed in the Great Meteoroid Strike, Darv. But I’m sure you will all agree that the radiation levels must have been significant to have created such a spectacle. Or does Darv believe that we could fake the recording?”

“Oh, I’m sure it’s genuine,” said Darv. “But no matter how hard you work at trying to prove that Paradise is unsuitable nothing can alter the fact that I saw two advanced humanoids in the recording.”

“Advanced, Darv?” queried Angel One.

“Not by our standards,” said Darv. “But they were indigenous to Paradise and they were the product of at least one million years’ evolution. If they can adapt to the radiation, assuming that it’s dangerous, then so can we.”

“How do you know that they did adapt?” said Angel One. “There were less than a thousand pairs at the time of Commander Sinclair’s visit. For all we know they could be the remnants of a once-dominant race that covered the entire planet. We don’t know if the humanoids on Paradise are destined to rise to civilization or are falling from it.”

“Is there any sign of a former civilization on Paradise?” asked Sharna.

“No,” Angel One replied. “But the erosive effect of Paradise’s highly active atmosphere and weather systems would be enough to wipe out the vestiges of even large cities during the course of half a million years.”

“We’re going to settle on Paradise,” said Astra. passionately. “I don’t know what will happen to us, but I do know that my baby’s not going to be born on the Challenger.”

* * * *

Darv sat on the steps leading to the shuttle’s entrance and studied the figures he had scribbled on the pad. Astra stopped piling the food and clothing supplies on the floor near the shuttle and sent Tidy off to locate some first aid equipment. “Well?”

“It’s crazy to think of leaving the Challenger in one of these things,” Darv complained. “The journey would take weeks.”

“No,” said Astra firmly.

Darv held up his pad that was covered with the computer results of numerous calculations. “All six shuttles have the same performance —

right?"

"Right."

"It's a thousand million miles to Paradise. I've worked out a sunward minimum energy orbit that intersects Paradise twelve weeks after leaving the Challenger. There's no way of reducing that figure."

"That's not what I worked out," said Astra.

"Well, I wish you'd show me your figures because they're doing things for you which they're not doing for me."

Astra stepped past Darv and entered the shuttle. He took a playful bite at her ankle but she was not in the mood for games. He followed her to the pilot's control panel where she touched out some figures on the graphic display.

"There," said Astra. "I worked them out yesterday and they're sound."

Darv touched the key to run Astra's program. The screen showed a graphic representation of the shuttle separating from the Challenger. The shuttle fired its main engine in a hard braking burn to cancel the Challenger's orbital velocity around the sun and a second time to assist the sun's gravitational pull as the shuttle fell sunward. Figures showing the shuttle's mounting acceleration and diminishing fuel reserves were displayed at the side of the screen together with a rapidly winking set of figures that indicated the duration in hours of the speeded-up, simulated voyage. Several firings of the main engine sent the shuttle plunging down into the atmosphere of Paradise and a series of final burns showed the shuttle settling neatly on the surface.

Darv looked at the final fuel figures in disbelief before turning to Astra. "You're not serious, Astra, surely?"

"Why not?"

There was a resolute set to Astra's face the Darv found disturbing. Since her discovery that she was pregnant her personality had undergone a significant change. The carefree young girl had gone, to be replaced by a determined young woman with a streak of ruthlessness that manifested itself when ever she suspected that the safety of her unborn child was threatened.

"But look at the figures," Darv protested pointing to the screen. "Forty-five per cent of total boost capacity for dropping sunward... Another forty-five per cent for deceleration and establishing an orbit around Paradise; seven per cent for atmospheric entry and atmospheric flight..."

“And two per cent for landing,” Astra finished. “A ten day journey — yes?”

“A fast trip,” Darv agreed. “But those figures add up to—”

“I’ve also allowed for a two-tonne payload of supplies.”

“Listen, Astra. Your figures add up to ninety-nine per cent of our fuel burned. We touch down on Paradise with one per cent left in our tanks!”

“So?”

Darv suddenly felt trapped. “Supposing the angels are right and Paradise isn’t suitable? How do we get back to the Challenger if we have to?”

The resolute light in Astra’s eyes alarmed Darv. “The answer to that question, Darv, is that Paradise will be suitable and we won’t be coming back.”

* * * *

Sharna looked critically at the one-piece suit Astra was wearing and shook her head. “Red doesn’t suit you.”

Astra smiled. “I wasn’t concerned about the appearance of the thing. Do you think it’s practical?”

“Show me the soles and heels.”

Astra stood on one leg while Sharna examined the garment’s undersole. “That’s going to be where all the wear is,” Sharna observed. “Get the android to make the heels and soles as thick and as tough as possible.”

Astra nodded and gave the two garment-making androids revised instructions.

The girls were sitting cross-legged on the floor of the terra-forming centre surrounded by bolts of cloth that they had found in the stores. The two garment-making androids were busily turning out a wide variety of lightweight clothes for Astra and Darv while Tidy fussed around trying to prevent the mess the two machines were making getting out of control.

“Of all the androids, I think I’m going to miss the garment-makers the most,” said Astra, opening the seams of the one-piece suit and

stepping out of it.

Sharna looked up from the overshoes she was inspecting. "There's a thousand and one things you're going to miss, Astra."

Astra was thoughtful for a moment. "I'll miss you, Sharna. I'll miss you very much." She gave an embarrassed smile. "Well... that seems to be everything."

"Astra," said Sharna, watching Astra folding clothes that the androids had finished. "Is life on the ship really so bad? You and Darv could live here — it's uncontrolled — there's no way that the guardian angels would be able to harm your baby."

"How long will they allow it to remain uncontrolled, Sharna? They'd get the service androids to carry out repairs. No... the only way I could ever be happy on the Challenger is if the angels were destroyed."

Darv and Telson entered the centre.

"We've finished checking the shuttle," said Telson. "It's never been used, and is in perfect working order as far as we can see."

"Tidy," Astra commanded, pointing to the finished clothes. "You can take those aboard and make a start on clearing up in here."

"Make a start!" the android echoed indignantly. "I've been trying to clear up for the past hour."

"Well now is your chance to try extra hard."

Sharna grinned. "Wouldn't you like to take Tidy with you, Astra?"

"I don't think so."

The girls looked at each other and burst out laughing.

* * * *

Sharna and Telson finished cramming supplies into the shuttle's stowage bay and closed the bay's outer door. "That's everything," said Sharna as she and Telson entered the shuttle's main cabin where Darv and Astra were completing the pre-separation checks.

Astra turned round and smiled gratefully. "You've both been very kind," she said.

"We've both been crazy to help at all," Telson growled. "Is everything

ready?"

Astra glanced at her screen. "Water, fuel, food, drugs — everything. And all systems are in a green condition."

"Well," said Telson after an embarrassed pause. "We've said our goodbyes so there's no point in delaying things any longer. Sharna and I will operate the excursion airlock from the terra-forming centre." He took Sharna by the arm and turned to the shuttle's open airlock doors.

"Thanks for everything, both of you," said Darv.

Telson nodded. "If we ever win total control over the Challenger, we'll return to Paradise to see how you're faring —radiation or no radiation." He gave a half smile. "We're going to miss you both... But we've said all that. Come on, Sharna —there's a control desk we've got to learn how to use."

Telson and Sharna returned to the terra-forming centre and sat at the two consoles that faced the window overlooking the excursion terminal. Sharna contacted Astra to ensure that the shuttle was sealed before she cut the excursion terminal's artificial gravity and touched the controls to open the main airlock door that the shuttle was facing.

In the shuttle, Darv watched the huge door sliding open and applied a short burst of directional thrust to lift the craft off the floor of the terminal.

"Thank you, Sharna," he acknowledged. "Moving into the airlock now."

Light came on inside the cavernous interior of the freight airlock as Darv edged the shuttle forward. His rear-view screen showed the door sliding shut.

"Evacuating airlock," Telson's voice reported.

As soon as the ambient air-pressure reading in front of Darv reached zero, the outer hull door began sliding open. What started as a slit of stars slowly widened to become a forbidding rectangle of countless millions of burning points of light.

Darv glanced sideways at Astra who was staring at the stars with a fixed expression. "You can still change your mind," he suggested gently.

Astra shook her head without speaking.

Darv applied a burst of rearward thrust that sent the shuttle edging forward into space. It cleared the shadow of the Challenger's stupendous bulk and was bathed in weak sunlight. At a distance of a thousand million miles, the sun was little more than a disc of light,

but it was several billion times nearer than the nearest star and was therefore the brightest object in the heavens.

“Shuttle to Challenger,” Darv reported. “Separation complete.”

The shuttle cruised the entire length of the mighty starship, crossing the gulf of tangled and twisted metal that marked the site of the Great Meteoroid Strike. It moved towards the prow of the ship and the semi-circle of brightly-lit view ports of the deserted main control room.

“Ten seconds to main engine burn,” said Darv as he orientated the shuttle in accordance with graphics on the inertial navigation screen.

“For the first time I feel safe.” said Astra quietly.

“We haven’t got anywhere yet.”

“I don’t care. I feel safe.”

There were final farewells from Telson and Sharna. “Don’t forget to radio us your landing site,” was Telson’s final reminder.

The main rocket engine fired automatically as Darv completed his acknowledgement. The gap between the shuttle and the Challenger widened slowly at first and then with increasing rapidity as the tiny craft accelerated into its thousand million mile fall towards the distant sun.

* * * *

The guardian angels watched the departing space shuttle with equanimity. They accepted that they had failed abysmally with Darv and Astra. The knowledge increased their determination to ensure that the same thing did not happen with Telson and Sharna. As soon as the couple were in suspended animation, an immediate start would be made on building a fourth-generation crew.

* * * *

“That’s it,” said Telson, standing up. “There’s no point in staying here any longer. We can speak to them from the main control room.”

Sharna moved away from the desk she had been sitting at and paused by a console that they had not used. There were no control areas

marked on the featureless surface.

“I wonder what this desk is for, Telson?”

Telson shrugged. “All the equipment in this place is a bit of a mystery.”

“That’s why we ought to familiarise ourselves with it.”

“Not now, Sharna,” said Telson moving to the terra-forming centre’s entrance.

“Why not? What else is there for us to do? We’ve got ten days until we know whether or not Darv and Astra have made a safe landing. And you agreed that we make no attempt to leave this solar system until then.” Without waiting for Telson’s reply, Sharna sat down at the strange console and activated it by passing her hand back and forth above its featureless surface.

The console came to life. As Sharna stared down, symbols and graphics began to glow on the surface and increase in intensity.

“Telson — come and look at this.”

Sharna’s tone was enough for Telson to move to her side.

“What do you make of that?”

Lines were appearing on the surface. At first Telson thought that he was looking at an electronic circuit and then he realised that it was a plan of the ship. “It doesn’t make sense,” he muttered. “Why have a control desk without any controls?”

“Unless it’s some sort of data screen,” said Sharna, every bit as baffled as Telson.

The information of the horizontal screen became clearer. Corridors and passageways were identified by their numbers, and a legend appeared that indicated the terra-forming centre.

“My God,” Telson breathed softly. “Look, Sharna! Just look at that!” His finger trembled slightly as it traced a series of parallel lines that ended at a box symbol that was identified by the caption:

ANCILLARY GUARDIANS OF ENVIRONMENT AND LIFE — SYSTEM ONE AND SYSTEM TWO — CENTRAL SWITCHING ROOM.

Sharna’s face was ashen as she met Telson’s eyes. “It’s on this level,” she said hollowly. And then she was virtually shouting: “The angel’s central switching room is on this level!”

The sixth planet of the solar system was like no planet that Darv and Astra had ever seen. It had a breathtaking system of braided rings that formed a multi-coloured equatorial band around the methane and ammonia giant. Astra measured the diameter of the rings with the shuttle's instruments and arrived at a value of 170,000 miles, yet they were so thin that they seemed to disappear as the shuttle passed them edge on.

The fifth planet was on the far side of the sun and was therefore invisible to the shuttle's optical instruments. The fourth planet was similar to Kyros in their home solar system —a reddish-hued barren world with ice-caps of frozen carbon-dioxide.

But five days after separation from the Challenger it was the third planet and its crater-scarred moon that was holding the couple's rapt attention.

After six days it was possible to discern the illuminated crescents of both bodies without the aid of the telescope. The passing of each hour brought a noticeable increase in the apparent size of Paradise and its satellite: as the shuttle dropped closer towards the sun, so the sun's rapidly mounting gravitational pull increased the rate of fall of the tiny spacecraft.

While Astra was sleeping, Darv checked the shuttle's speed in relation to Paradise. The spacecraft would, even after a braking burn, hit the atmosphere of Paradise at an incredible 100,000 miles per hour. He had no idea if such an impact was within the design limitations of the shuttle's heatshield. He radioed a report to the Challenger. The rapidly increasing gulf between the two craft made communications frustrating — it would be nearly two hours before he received an acknowledgement.

* * * *

Sharna directed the beam from the arc lantern on to the rough sketch plan that Telson was holding.

"It's got to be left," said Telson. He flashed his own lantern on the roof of the low corridor. The massive trunking that ran along the wall where it joined the roof snaked to the left, confirming the information on the plan that Telson had copied from the diagram he and Sharna

had discovered in the terra-forming centre.

They had been stumbling through the strange corridor for an hour, following the trunking which they were convinced would eventually lead them to the guardian angels' central switching room.

At each junction, more optical tracks fed into the main trunking, swelling its size, until it was now nearly two feet in diameter.

Telson shone his lantern along the corridor that led to the left. An optical track from the right joined the trunking virtually doubling its size so that they would have to negotiate the passageways by crouching.

"You don't have to come any further," said Telson.

"I'm not turning back now," Sharna retorted. "And we agreed that we stick together."

Telson looked at the plan. "About another hundred yards to go if I managed to draw it to scale."

* * * *

The guardian angels noted the approach of Telson and Sharna with interest at first and then with mounting alarm when they realized that the couple were unfailingly taking the correct turnings at each junction. The angels had always regarded the complex labyrinth of narrow maintenance passages as a protection in their own right. Such was the confusion of interconnected passages that even service androids carrying out repairs on the optical tracks occasionally got lost and had to be talked out of the maze.

Telson and Sharna were not lost. They were moving towards the central switching room with unerring accuracy.

One by one, the guardian angels activated the nightmare barriers that were their last line of defence.

* * * *

"Challenger to shuttle," said the surgical android. "This is SA10 on duty in the control room acknowledging your report which I have

recorded.”

Astra frowned at Darv. “That’s odd,” she said. “Telson promised us that at least he or Sharna would be on watch until we had reported a safe planetfall.”

Darv nodded his agreement with Astra and inwardly cursed the two-hour time-lag that made it impossible to have a coherent conversation with the Challenger. If there was a God, Darv wondered why he had been so generous with the size of the Universe and so niggardly with the speed of light and electromagnetic radio waves. 187,000 miles per second was nothing when one considered that it could take a radio signal several hours to traverse even a moderately sized solar system.

“Thank you, SA10,” Darv acknowledged. “Will you please advise what has happened to Commander Telson and Sharna.”

“Turn back, Sharna,” whispered the voice. “Turn back...”

Sharna touched Telson’s arm and stopped walking. “Did you hear that, Telson?”

“Hear what?” Telson tried to straighten up and bumped his head on the trunking.

“A voice... I think it sounded like Angel One. It said something about turning back.”

“Your imagination,” said Telson shortly.

“Turn back, Sharna. There is danger ahead!”

Telson was about to continue down the passageway, but Sharna clung to his arm. “Telson — they can see us and hear us. I always know when they’re watching me.”

At that moment the voice touched Telson’s mind. He became tense.

The whole things crazy,” said Sharna worriedly. “I mean — what can we hope to achieve?”

“I’m now certain they lied when they said that this solar system is swamped with radiation,” said Telson grimly. “And now they’re trying to play tricks with our minds.”

“Turn back! Both of you must turn back! Death lies ahead!”

The insidious voice reached deep into Sharna’s mind, making her want to cry out in fear. The sudden reassuring weight of Telson’s arm across her shoulders restored some of her evaporating confidence.

“It’s only a voice,” said Telson, urging her forward. “It can’t possibly hurt us. We’ve just got to ignore it.”

They moved another twenty yards through the gloomy passageway. The voice rose to a demented shriek that clawed at Sharna's sanity and would have frozen every muscle on her body had not Telson been at her side, half pushing and half dragging her, while offering words of encouragement that enabled her to cling to her dwindling reserves of strength and courage.

"Death lies ahead! Death! DEATH! DEATH! DEATH!"

And then she saw the hideous creature. Gleaming fangs that dripped red saliva; burning, yellow-rimmed eyes that screamed venomous hatred; flaring nostrils and rangy, powerful muscles under blood-matted fur that were preparing the monstrosity to spring at her throat.

Sharna screamed and in that instant the ground beneath her vanished. She heard her own scream echoing back at her as she plunged into the black, bottomless pit.

* * * *

Darv touched Astra's arm.

"Staring at it won't make it come any quicker, my lovely."

Astra turned her head from the view port. "It seems ages since you last called me that," she said, smiling and leaning her head back against Darv's chest. "Isn't it the most beautiful planet you've ever seen, Darv?"

Darv stared at the magnificent blue-green sphere for some moments and nodded. "But with an extremely ugly moon," he joked. "Have you ever seen so many craters? There are even craters in the craters."

Astra laughed and became serious. "What do you suppose has happened to Sharna and Telson?"

"They'll call us up when they return to the control room," said Darv lightly.

"If they return."

"Hey. We've got a job to do," said Darv, changing the subject. "We've got to select a landing site."

"Can't it wait? We don't begin atmospheric entry for another two days."

"We can select a landing area now and a definite site within the area

before we enter the atmosphere.”

Glad of something to do to take her mind off Telson and Sharna, Astra studied the planet through the forward view ports which were now dominated by the planet’s shining crescent. “Where do you suggest?”

Darv activated the topographic radar screen and pointed to a land mass that resembled an inverted triangle. The bulk of the land mass was located in the northern hemisphere and it tapered down to a rounded apex that extended over thirty degrees into the southern hemisphere.

“Why there?” asked Astra.

“Because that’s where the probe is located,” Darv replied. “If all those animals can survive there, then so can we.”

Astra shivered inwardly at the thought of coming face to face with the grotesque creatures with the long necks that they had seen in the hologram transmitted from the probe.

* * * *

The following day was the ninth since separation. Paradise had swollen to the point where it was only possible to see its complete disc by moving close to the view ports. It now took three hours to send a message to and receive a reply from the Challenger.

“We have still been unable to locate Commander Telson and Sharna,” the surgical android reported to Darv across a thousand million miles. “We now have thirty service units searching for them.”

Darv read out the landing site that he and Astra had eventually decided on after some discussion. It was on the eastern coast of the land mass, one thousand miles to the north of the planet’s equator. He radioed the co-ordinates to the Challenger.

The surgical android acknowledged three hours later when the shuttle was, according to its instruments, passing through the outer belts of the radiation zones that encircled Paradise. The radiation levels were low enough not to interfere with radio communications between the shuttle and the Challenger. It meant that the guardian angels had grossly exaggerated the dangers. The knowledge gave Astra and Darv renewed hope for their future although they were desperately worried about the fate that had befallen Telson and Sharna. If they had the fuel, they would have turned back but the shuttle had passed the point

of no return shortly after it had fired its main engine following separation from the Challenger.

* * * *

“Ten hours to atmospheric entry,” said Darv cryptically as he loaded the landing site references into the shuttle’s navigation computer.

The shuttle’s automatic systems immediately set to work on an analysis of the planet that it was approaching at 150,000 miles per hour. Radar signals assessed the density and composition of the atmosphere and displayed the information on the data screen located between Darv’s and Astra’s seats. The systems studied the planet’s gravity and compared the information with data on the amount of fuel remaining in the shuttle’s tanks. One second after Darv had loaded the selected landing site into the navigation computer the display came up with the legend:

LANDING NOT ADVISED — WILL LEAVE INSUFFICIENT FUEL FOR
RETURN TO MOTHER SHIP

There was no suitable response given on the options list so Darv had to resort to a voice input command. He said: “Return to mother ship not required.”

The computer digested this and came up with.

LANDING POSSIBLE BUT NOT ADVISED WITH EXISTING FUEL
LEVELS. TOUCH PROCEED KEY THREE TIMES IF YOU WISH TO
CONTINUE.

Darv touched the “proceed” key as instructed. He grinned at Astra. “Seems that our clever little shuttle doesn’t like the look of Paradise as much as we do.”

Astra looked worried. She had learned to respect the judgement of the onboard computers used on the shuttles. “Do you think we’ve made a terrible mistake?”

“Relax, Astra. It hasn’t said that we can’t land — only that it’s not advisable. Obviously it’s been programmed to query landing requests that will leave it short of fuel.” Darv’s cheerful reply to Astra’s query belied his concern — he had noticed that the separation burn from the Challenger had cost them one per cent of their fuel above the estimate. Astra had not looked carefully at the data display and did not appear to have noticed the discrepancy. He saw no point in

drawing her attention to it now.

* * * *

The next eight hours were the longest in the couple's memory. One of the disadvantages of the shuttle's fully-automated landing systems was that there was little for them to do except gaze down at the dazzling splendour beneath them while trying not to fret about the impending atmospheric entry.

They sat in silence, watching the swelling orb. The only movement in the cabin was the constant winking of figures on the displays as the shuttle's systems continuously updated the information they were receiving from Paradise.

At precisely one hour before entry, the shuttle's directional thrusters fired briefly and rotated the spacecraft through one hundred and eighty degrees so that it was travelling backwards along its flight-path. The vast curvature of the white-lace horizon dipped out of sight for a few seconds and reappeared.

FASTEN SEAT RESTRAINTS flashed an illuminated sign.

Darv leaned sideways and gave Astra a lingering kiss before helping her to secure her seat harness and then fastening his own.

"Our fuel's down one per cent on what it should be, isn't it?" said Astra in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Nothing to worry about," was Darv's flippant reply. "We would've had one per cent in hand anyway."

BRAKING BURN IN 60 SECONDS advised the data display.

The seconds seemed to stretch into minutes.

20 SECONDS said the display... 10 SECONDS... 5 SECONDS... 4... 3... 2... 1... ZERO...

The main engine's deafening roar filled the cabin for three minutes. Astra opened her eyes when the motor cut out. She saw that the shuttle's speed had dropped from 150,000 miles per hour to 100,000 miles per hour. Clearly the shuttle considered the velocity too high to attempt an atmospheric entry because it fired the engine again to claw the spacecraft's speed down to 70,000 miles per hour.

The directional thrusters fired again, turning the shuttle around until it was pointing along its flight-path once more.

ATMOSPHERE ENTRY IMMINENT. BUFFETING ANTICIPATED AT FORCE 8 warned the display.

The directional thrusters fired again — this time to lift the shuttle's nose. For a few seconds nothing happened and then Darv and Astra became conscious of a faint whining noise. There was a severe jolt that was too harsh for the artificial gravity compensator to cancel.

The whining ceased. It started again after a few seconds and became progressively louder until a second jolt shook the spacecraft. The motion puzzled Darv until he realised that the shuttle was losing velocity by skimming in and out of the upper layers of the atmosphere in exactly the same way that flat objects he used to send skimming across the surface of the reservoir lost speed with each skip. His respect deepened for the men and women who had designed and built the shuttle.

The next jolt was the worst of all. The sharp whining that followed rose to a shriek. Darv risked a quick glance at Astra and saw that her eyes were closed and her face serene. The whiteness of her knuckles gripping her arm rests told a different story.

The shuttle's nose lifted higher as the heatshield began to drive downward into the atmosphere. Ionised gas began glowing around the view ports. A message, hopelessly garbled by the plasma that was forming around the shuttle's radio antennae, tried to break through at that moment.

"...lenger... Shuttle..." said the surgical android's voice. "...control lost... Commander Telson... lost... Sharna..." the words tailed away into an unintelligible blast of white noise.

Darv turned his head to Astra. "Could you make out any of that?"

Astra kept her eyes closed and shook her head.

The distorted message was immediately forgotten when the buffeting started. Everything around Darv became a blur; the displays dissolved into vague streaks of coloured light, and the flames roaring past the view ports mercifully merged into a less frightening kaleidoscope of dancing orange and crimson patterns. He tried forcing his head back harder into the headrest to prevent it being thrown about and discovered that the terrifying decelerating was doing the job for him.

Astra opened her eyes briefly and closed them again. She guessed that the shuttle's heatshield was being burned away so that the incandescent particles burning off took their heat with them. The knowledge was no comfort when she saw the inferno raging beyond the view ports. The deceleration rammed her deeper into her seat. She

felt the blood draining from her face. She had no way of telling if she had passed out for one second or one minute, but the noise and buffeting had miraculously stopped. The sudden silence was uncanny.

“Are you all right, Astra?” asked Darv anxiously. He gave a warm, delighted smile when he saw her eyes open.

“What happened?”

“We’re through,” he said simply. “Stable flight. Altitude — one hundred thousand feet.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Astra weakly.

“Nor do I.”

Astra leaned forward against her seat harness and looked down. Through breaks in the cloud she could see a huge expanse of blue. “Now what happens?” she inquired.

“We’re gliding down at one thousand feet per minute so presumably the shuttle won’t take any further action for at least another hour and a half.”

The shuttle dipped through the cloud just over an hour later. The cloud thinned out so that after another fifteen minutes the shuttle was flying over water that was so blue that it almost hurt the eyes to look at it.

“It would be beautiful if there wasn’t so much of it,” commented Astra when the shuttle’s altitude was down to 12,000 feet.

“My feelings exactly,” agreed Darv.

The ribbon of coastline appeared on the horizon at the same time as it appeared on the radar screen. The shuttle’s vertical descent velocity increased as it lost forward speed.

Another minute passed. It was now possible to distinguish the regular swell on the surface of the water. Darv glanced down at the navigation displays. The shuttle was heading due west in a straight line towards the landing site that was centred on the screen.

“Just enough fuel for a five second burn,” Astra observed. “Will we make it?”

Darv eyed the approaching land and glanced down at the water 3000 feet below. “Just,” he said, hoping that his voice sounded confident. The truth was that the water was getting nearer much quicker than the land was.

The main engine fired without warning. The shuttle’s nose lifted, the spacecraft picked up speed. The ground proximity display managed to

sustain a steady figure instead of one that was continuously dropping. Darv's eyes flickered to the fuel-reading display. He resisted the temptation to swear out loud. At that moment the low fuel warning gong sounded and the engine cut out a second later.

Darv cancelled the automatic pilot and assumed manual control. There was little he could do except put the shuttle's nose down in the hope that the increased speed would give it enough lift to reach the broad band of yellow and green that rose out of the water some eight miles straight ahead.

Astra remained silent and white-faced, staring down at the water that seemed to be racing up to meet them.

At 1000 feet Darv thought that perhaps the shuttle would reach land but the inboard computer did not share his optimism.

DITCHING PROCEDURE INITIATED flashed up on the screen.

There was a loud thump from underneath the floor and a new message appeared: LANDING SKIDS JETTISONED.

The cryptic legend puzzled Darv until he realised that the shuttle's best chance of remaining in one piece was to present a clean under belly to the water upon impact. At 250 feet the inner and outer airlock doors opened of their own accord. At 200 miles per hour slipstream screamed into the shuttle's interior and made it difficult for Darv to think properly. He stared in almost hypnotised fascination at the ribbon of yellow that was hurtling towards him. Suddenly Astra was yelling at him above the howling racket of the air rushing past the open airlock.

"Pull the nose up!" she screamed. "Pull the nose up! For God's sake do as it says!"

Darv looked down at the display just as Astra's hands closed over his hands and hauled back on the controls. A shuddering crash suddenly ripped through the spacecraft, slamming Darv down into his seat and driving the air from his lungs. Everything went dark for an instant as the massive deceleration crushed his eyeballs into the bottom of their sockets. Barely had he managed to draw another breath when a second mind-pulverising shockwave smashed against his senses. A tiny part of his brain that manage to remain clear during the appalling assault on his reason noted that the shuttle seemed to be bouncing across the water.

The third and final crash was the least severe but it was enough to rip the skin away from the bottom of the spacecraft's drastically weakened hull. There was the sudden cold touch of water swirling

around Darv's feet. Even before his hand reached the seat restraint release, the water was up to his knees. The shuttle stopped bucking and seemed to settle lower. Water began roaring through the open airlock doors. Astra had released her harness and was standing beside her seat, leaning backwards as the shuttle's nose tilted down. Darv grabbed her hand and hauled her towards the airlock.

"I can't swim," she gasped as the water in the cabin rose around her waist.

"Doesn't matter — let's get out of this thing before it sinks."

The force of the water surging through the airlock meant that Darv had to hang on to the door surround and thrust Astra out of the shuttle with his foot. The water was a living wall piling up against his chest as he hung on to the door surround and yanked himself out of the spacecraft. Water stung his eyes and got into his mouth. He experienced a moment of panic when he remembered the angels' warning that the water on Paradise was poisonous. It didn't taste poisonous — merely salty. The shuttle gave a lurch and drove its nose deeper under water. Darv pushed himself clear and trod water.

"Astra! Where are you?"

"Here."

Darv discovered that it was virtually impossible to swim in the one-piece suit. It took him several clumsy strokes to reach the shuttle's tail where Astra was clinging with white-faced grim determination to the rocket motor fairing. He grabbed hold of a torn strut and held on beside her to get his breath back.

"Now what?" gasped Astra.

"Beach about two hundred yards. We'll have to swim... Shuttle won't stay afloat much longer."

At that moment bubbles erupted around them and the spacecraft sank lower until the swell was virtually washing over the hull. Darv opened the seams on his suit and struggled out of it. He told Astra to do the same and reached down to pull it away from her legs once she had got her arms free.

"Okay," he gasped, releasing his hold on the sinking shuttle and hooking an arm around Astra's neck. "I'll hold your head above water. Keep your eyes and mouth shut and don't struggle. Ready?"

Astra reluctantly let go of the rocket motor fairing. She felt Darv's legs beneath her push away from the doomed spacecraft. He turned slightly on to his side in the water to give his free arm a more comfortable stroke and struck out towards the boom and roar of

waves breaking on the beach.

After fifteen minutes' sustained effort, Darv was barely conscious of his surroundings. His limbs were aching to the point of numbness. The breaking waves sounded nearer. He lowered his feet to tread water and they made contact with the bottom.

"Astra!" he croaked. "You can stand up now."

The couple staggered to their feet, clinging to each other, and half-waded, half-stumbled towards the beach. They were too exhausted to be scared of the rollers that scooped them up in the last fifty yards of their struggle and hurled them breathless, bruised and naked on to the warm sand. They crawled a little way up the beach to be clear of the surf and lay still for five minutes.

Astra was the first to recover her senses. She sat up and gazed about her in wonder — her bruises and aches from the recent ordeal forgotten. There was no sign of the shuttle. They had been deposited on a beach of dazzling white sand that formed a ribbon between the water and rich, green vegetation. The sky was the same flawless blue as the water, and the sun was as warm as the solar lights above the Challenger's reservoir.

From the trees lining the beach came a sound that she had heard only in recordings. Somehow, even the most perfect of recordings failed to capture the richness and depth of birdsong. A movement caught her eye. Something white was flashing across the water at wave-top height. The seabird plunged into the water and became airborne again with a small fish in its bill.

"Your wish has finally come true."

Astra turned her head. Darv was sitting up, leaning back on his hands and grinning at her.

"Wish?" she said.

"A beach by a lake. Sand. And a warm sun." Darv squinted up into the sky. "At least it is warm so we won't freeze."

"It's beautiful, isn't it? It's a hundred times more beautiful than I ever imagined it could be. Shall we go exploring?"

Darv looked anxiously at Astra and shook his head. "I don't think we should move from here until you've had at least an hour's rest, my lovely."

Astra stretched out beside Darv and took hold of his hand. Ten minutes later they were both sound asleep.

The cold touch on her ankles woke Astra. She sat up suddenly. Her eyes went round with shock at what she saw and she screamed in terror.

The water had crept nearer while they were asleep.

Every second spent in the magnificent forest brought new sensations: brilliantly coloured birds; heavily scented flowers of every conceivable shade; swarms of small, chattering creatures that scampered through the trees at their approach — and always the trees. Large trees, small trees, trees with leaves as broad as they were, trees with spiky leaves that they quickly learned to avoid brushing against. And each new tree, flower or bird seemed to be more beautiful than the last.

Despite their nakedness and vulnerability, it never occurred to Darv and Astra to be afraid. Even their first shock when they discovered that water had moved up the beach had been dissipated by Astra's reasoning that the line of rotting seaweed near the top of the beach marked the extremity of the mighty lake's advance.

They came to a clearing that was dominated by a towering fruit tree which, judging by the state of its gnarled roots, was probably the oldest tree in the forest. Thousands of small creatures who had been feeding in the tree fled as they drew near — a brown, panic-stricken furry tide that swarmed down the trunk and dashed into the safety of trees on the far side of the clearing. The first living creatures other than humans that they had ever seen and they were not afraid.

They paused beneath the tree and looked up longingly at the tempting fruit. The ground under the tree was littered with the remains of rotting cores that the creatures had discarded. The decaying fruit released a pungent, mouth-watering smell as it was pulped beneath their bare feet.

"I could reach those lower ones if I climbed on to your shoulders," said Astra, pointing up.

"You shouldn't go climbing, and we don't know if they're safe to eat."

"If they are safe for those animals then they're bound to be okay for us

to eat. I'm starving. And furthermore, I'm just as fit as you are."

Darv decided not to argue. He leaned against the bole of the tree and hooked his hands together to provide a foothold for Astra. She climbed on to his shoulders and swung a leg over the lowest branch, gradually easing her weight further away from the trunk along the branch until the fruits were within reach of her outstretched hand. Darv watched her anxiously as she plucked one of the fruits from an overhanging branch. She sniffed at it cautiously, sank her teeth into its flesh, and crunched noisily.

"Well?" queried Darv.

Astra pulled a face but continued eating. "It tastes a bit odd," she admitted. "Sort of like apple. But it's all right. Least it gets rid of that horrible salty taste. Here — catch!"

Darv caught the fruit that Astra had bitten into and sniffed it.

Astra laughed down at him. "It's not bad at all really. It's just that the first taste is a bit odd. Try it."

"Are you sure?"

"Go on — try a bite."

Darv took a bite out of the apple-like fruit and chewed suspiciously. His caution gave way to a broad smile. "Hey — not bad."

"Well, at least we won't starve," Astra commented as she stood up on the branch. She had seen a cluster of the fruits hanging below a neighbouring branch. She placed one foot on the nearby branch and, with her legs wide apart, pulled the fruit towards herself. Darv was looking up at her. For the first time, for no sensible reason that she could think of, she suddenly realised that she was ashamed of her nakedness.

"Astra!" said Darv urgently. "Don't move! Whatever you do, don't move!"

Astra froze.

"To the left of your right hand."

Astra's body was rigid. Only her eyes moved. The snake was coiled around the branch that her right hand was resting on. Its small black eyes were regarding her steadily. The mottled markings down its back screamed danger. For timeless seconds neither Astra nor the snake moved.

"Take your hand away from the branch," said Darv quietly. "As slowly as you can... That's it..."

The motion appeared to startle the creature for it began to withdraw. At first Astra thought that it was disappearing until she realised that it was backing into its hole in the branch. After a minute only its eyes were visible — two gleaming points of unblinking malevolent light staring glassily at her from the dim recess of the hollow branch.

Astra was so paralysed with shock that Darv had to climb up beside her to persuade her to come down. It was when she was safely back on the ground that she burst into tears.

“It’s a terrible place,” she wept. “All I want is to be back on the Challenger.”

Darv did his best to comfort Astra but his words lacked conviction because of his own mounting apprehension about Paradise and the feeling that perhaps they had made a terrible and irrevocable mistake.

It was as well that he had no idea that there was far worse to come.

* * * *

They had been following the sound of the stream for twenty minutes, taking straight lines through the dense undergrowth for fear of losing track of the running water’s sweet music. By the time they came upon it, their feet were cut and bleeding.

Darv splashed into the middle of the stream and scooped up a handful of water. He tasted it as it streamed through his fingers and gave a shout of elation. “It’s fresh water, Astra! Come and taste!”

Astra adjusted the hopelessly inadequate skirt that she had fashioned from leaves and joined Darv. He cupped his palms together and scooped up water so that she could drink from his hands.

“Better?” asked Darv when she had finished.

She managed a faint smile and nodded.

Darv grinned and splashed water over her. “We’ve got to look after the two of you... Which makes twice as much trouble.”

Astra laughed and retaliated. Two minutes later they were laughing and chasing each other from one ankle-deep rock pool to the next. Their high-spirited play came to an abrupt end when Astra lashed out to kick water over Darv and saw the blood-bloated creature coiled around her ankle.

Astra’s scream of terror raised a storm of protesting cries from the

birds and hidden denizens of the surrounding forest. She fell backwards into the water. Her scream became a tortured, uncontrolled howl of hysteria. Darv grabbed at her foot and pulled the clinging creature away. It needed all his self-control not to be sick when he saw from the burst blood vessels beneath Astra's skin that the thing had been feeding on her blood. As he dragged Astra to her feet, he saw that two more of the loathsome creatures were adhering to her breasts.

* * * *

With the night came the storm.

Astra and Darv clung to each other; naked and cold — terrified orphans of the forest — with the frightful thunder and lightning rolling and crashing above their heads in a cacophonous uproar that numbed their senses.

Two hours before dawn brought the rain in a continuous freezing downpour. Gradually the ground beneath them became a heavy, clinging mud but Astra was too exhausted to care. All she could think of was the Challenger with its warm, comforting environment, and her air-conditioned room with its big, soft bed.

The rain stopped an hour before the dawn and, miraculously, Astra finally fell asleep, cradled in Darv's protective arms.

* * * *

The black despair that had settled on Darv and Astra during the terrible night was soon dispelled by the return of the warm sun. They washed and drank in a small water pool that was separate from the main stream and therefore free of the ghastly creatures they had encountered the previous day. They ate an adequate meal of the apple-like fruits that they found growing on a small tree near the stream.

"We ought to make our way back to the beach," said Darv two hours later after they had enjoyed a brief sleep in the sun stretched out on a rock.

“Why?”

“Maybe some of our supplies from the shuttle have been washed up in the night.”

“We’d never find our way back through the forest,” Astra pointed out.

Darv sat up and rubbed his eyes. “Come on, my lovely. The chances are that the stream leads to the beach.”

They discovered that walking barefoot was less unpleasant if they kept to the stream’s sandy banks. After forty minutes they came to the beach. To Astra, it seemed that the vast stretch of blue water and the white sand was the most friendly place of all on Paradise.

Their search of the beach proved fruitless. The only discovery of any interest was a large white fish that was flapping about, trapped in a sand pool.

Darv examined the driftwood at the top of the beach. He pushed two straight lengths of slender tree trunk upright into the soft sand above the high water mark and pulled their tops together to form the apex of a triangle. Astra watched him curiously.

“What are you planning, Darv?”

“Some sort of shelter for tonight.”

“And tomorrow night. And the night after that,” Astra corrected.

Darv laughed. “If we rounded up a lot of these and stuck them in a circle, we could tie their tops together with some of that vine, or whatever it is hanging from the trees, and cover the whole thing in leaves to keep out the rain. At least we might be able to keep warm at night.”

“There’s something else we ought to try making first,” said Astra seriously.

“What’s that?”

“Fire.”

* * * *

Darv looked ruefully at the blister on his hand and threw the short stick down in disgust. “It’s useless, Astra — you can’t make fire with friction.”

Astra said nothing. She touched the tip of the stick that Darv had been rubbing back and forth in a notched piece of dry wood and then pressed it against Darv's cheek.

"Ouch!" he protested.

"Well — it's hot," said Astra.

"Well of course it's hot — but I'd never get it hot enough to start a fire."

Astra took the stick and began rolling it quickly between the palms of her hands while holding the tip of the stick pressed firmly into the notched dry wood.

"All you'll get is blisters," was Darv's contribution to her effort.

"Push some of that stuff around it," said Astra.

Darv shredded some dried seaweed and pushed it carefully around the tip of the stick. Astra settled down to a steady rhythm and kept it up for five minutes despite helpful comments from Darv such as: "You're wasting your time, my lovely."

Sweat began trickling down Astra's forehead. Darv watched with disinterest and then blinked, wondering if the tiny wisp of smoke had been a product of his imagination.

"Blow!" Astra said urgently. "Quickly!"

Darv crouched over the tip of wood and blew gently while pushing the dried seaweed closer. To his astonishment the material started to curl and blacken. He blew harder and the tiny flame, invisible in the bright sunlight, tongued through the dry seaweed and stung him on the cheek.

Astra took her hands away and gave a savage grin of triumph as the flames took hold while Darv carefully added more combustible material to keep the fire going.

They both worked hard for the rest of the morning, piling up sufficient driftwood and dry seaweed to keep the fire fuelled for at least another two days. Darv was opposed to Astra working but she insisted on doing her share.

They spent the early part of the afternoon asleep in the shade of the trees that lined the edge of the beach, and woke refreshed and eager to start work on the shelter. Once the skeleton was in place, fashioned from the abundant supply of driftwood, Darv climbed one of the trees and hacked down its broad fronds with the aid of a sharp-edged stone. Astra wove the giant leaves in and out of the shelter's primitive framework and stood back to admire her handiwork.

Darv dumped another armful of leaves at her feet. “Come on, my lovely. It’ll need that lot in place before it’s waterproof.”

“I’ve never made anything before,” said Astra proudly. But her pleasure at the discovery of her new-found skills was diminished when she realised with a guilty start that she had been too busy to think about Sharna and Telson.

Darv slipped his arm around her waist and gave her a gently hug. “I know what you’re thinking about,” he said. “If it’s any consolation, I haven’t given them much thought this afternoon either.”

* * * *

Darv selected a long, slender piece of driftwood and sharpened one end on a stone. Spearing a fish trapped in a sand pool proved unexpectedly easy and he even succeeded in catching two smaller fish using the same technique. They cooked them over the fire and decided that it was the best meal they had ever had in their lives.

Darv set about carefully building the fire half an hour before sunset so that it would not go out during the night. It was getting dark by the time he finished work. He and Astra crawled into the shelter and closed the entrance by means of a frond-covered frame that served as a crude door.

It was when they stretched out that they realised how tired they were. It was a pleasant form of tiredness — the exhaustion that comes from hard physical labour combined with a sense of real achievement.

* * * *

Astra was woken after dawn by a strange whistling sound. Perhaps it passed overhead or perhaps it came from the forest. She tried to focus her brain and decided that she had been woken by her recurring, but always pleasurable, dream about Darv and a strong young child playing together in the surf while she looked on. Her eyes and limbs were still heavy from the previous day’s exertions. Darv was beside her, lying on his stomach with an arm thrown carelessly across her thighs. She listened to the reassuring sound of his breathing for a few minutes and drifted back to sleep.

Astra picked up the first of the clay bowls that she had moulded in her fingers and examined it with pride. The sun had dried it in a most satisfactory manner. She dipped it into the stream, filled it with water and lifted it to her lips. She drank and set the bowl down on the rock beside her. It worked! Now for a much larger one. She stood up and glanced down the beach to make sure that Darv was not too far away. He was working on improvements to the shelter, occasionally stopping work to add more fuel to the fire that was burning briskly in the stiff morning breeze.

Astra knelt down again by the mouth of the stream and watched the dancing water as it gurgled noisily over the rocks on the last few yards of its rush to the sea. She tested the strength of the second bowl that she had made and decided that the new one, if it was to be of any use, should be jug-shaped so that it would be easier to carry water without spillage.

She drove her fingers deep into the oozing, wet hole she had dug beside the stream and lifted out enough clay to form the base of the jug. She had learned that it was useless trying to work too much clay at once because it invariably dried too quickly.

She worked slowly and carefully, so intent on her work that she was unaware that she was being watched. The dancing water effectively cloaked any unusual sound so that the first warning she had was when the huge shadow fell across her.

She gave a cry of alarm and wheeled round. The sun blinded her as she tried to look up at the thing that was towering over her.

"Sand," complained a familiar grating voice, "Bad for mechanisms. Gets everywhere."

"Astra!" cried another familiar voice. "Hey, Sharna! George has found Astra!"

Astra rose to her feet. Suddenly there was a roaring in her ears. Everything started spinning. Her knees buckled under her and she fell forward in a dead faint.

Astra had regained consciousness by the time George was setting her down carefully beside the shelter. “Sand gets in your mechanisms,” he grated sympathetically. “Know what it’s like. Very bad.”

Astra looked up, dazed, her mind reeling, as Telson, Sharna and Darv exchanged ecstatic greetings. Sharna knelt down beside Astra and gave her an enthusiastic squeeze and a kiss. Astra was unable to speak at first — she eventually managed to blurt out. “Sharna! It can’t be you!”

Sharna laughed and wiped away her tears of joy. “Of course it’s me. Who else could I be? Hey! Steady!” Sharna fell backwards on to the sand, half laughing and half crying as Astra threw her arms around her.

“We landed just after dawn.” Telson explained. “We knew we were near your landing site. We tried interrogating your shuttle’s radio beacon to get an accurate fix but couldn’t get an answer.

“We crashed the shuttle in the water,” said Darv.

Telson nodded. “Hardly surprising after travelling a thousand million miles. Luckily we didn’t have your problems.” He looked at the fire. “And it’s lucky we saw your smoke.”

* * * *

Telson jabbed his stick into another piece of fish and held it above the flames. He was nearing the end of his account. “You wouldn’t believe what they threw at us to prevent us reaching their central switching room. Hallucination holograms, light, sound, visions —everything.”

“How did you get past them?” Astra asked.

Sharna expression hardened at the recollection of the nightmare barriers. “Telson managed but he had to leave me. It was the only way.”

Telson nodded. “My lack of imagination that you’ve always complained about, Darv. This time it came in useful because the angels’ little nightmares didn’t affect me as much as they did Sharna.”

“But you got into their central switching room,” said Darv eagerly.

Telson nodded. “Oh, yes.”

“What was it like?”

“Not more than eight feet square.”

“What?”

“Our angels were nothing but two organic brains in two tanks. They were floating in some sort liquid. Nutrients, I suppose. It was a disappointment. Just those two tanks. No force shields to protect them. No service androids. Nothing.” Telson gave a hollow laugh. “All our lives we were ruled by two entities that we could have disposed of by two simple blows with a hammer.”

“Is that what you did?”

“No... They begged me to spare them. Can you imagine that? Our two guardian angels begging one of us to spare them? We did a deal. They agreed that this planet was suitable for settlement, and they agreed to allow the Challenger to be brought into a close orbit around Paradise so that we could leave by one of the space shuttles from the terraforming excursion terminal. You tell them the rest, Sharna.”

“We obtained your landing site reference from one of the surgical androids,” said Sharna. “And we left four of them in the main control room to handle the ship.”

Astra frowned. “Why, Sharna?”

“Because Angel One and Angel Two are going to continue the Earthsearch mission.”

“You mean that they might return?”

Sharna smiled. “You needn’t look so worried, Astra... They won’t return in our lifetime, or the lifetime of our children or their children.”

“But we’ll have to warn them,” said Astra, gazing out to sea to where the moon was rising.

Darv poked at the fire and sent sparks climbing into the darkening sky.

“Well,” said Sharna brightly. “Tomorrow we’ll collect the shuttle. The stowage bay is crammed with enough supplies to last us a lifetime.”

Astra thought of her row of little clay bowls and felt vaguely saddened.

Telson picked up a handful of sand and allowed the grains to run through his fingers. “We now have a planet of our own,” he said thoughtfully. “So what happens next?”

THE EARTHSEARCH SAGA

Book Two

EARTHSEARCH II — DEATHSHIP

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Prologue: Four million years ago...

NOTHING STIRRED IN THE MIGHTY SHIP as it swung sunwards across the solar system — its titanic bulk eclipsing the background myriads of stars of the galaxy. Four million years would pass before Mankind gave the galaxy a name, the Milky Way, but for the time-being the celestial wheel of crowded incandescent suns was merely a number in the ship's vast and silent library.

The passing hours and the increasing strength of the sun burning on its flawless black skin brought about a gradual awakening throughout the ship: signals flowed along hair-like fibre optic tracks, and artificial gravity was created throughout the ship's seven-mile length. It was extremely weak gravity at a level that would have ill-suited humans with their poor co-ordination and reflexes. But the intelligences aboard the starship were not men and women — they were robots for whom the low gravity was ideal — providing them with the necessary stability that enabled them to move with precision and purpose along the ship's scores of miles of darkened, silent corridors.

The first such machines in the awakening were service units whose limited intelligences were adequate for straightforward tasks that required little exercise of judgement. Obeying the programs provided when they had been built, they checked all the ship's millions of miles of fibre optic circuits and carried out repairs where necessary. Satisfied that all was well, they swarmed through service hatches onto the ship's hull and subjected it to a meticulous scrutiny. But the ship's outer skin was relatively new in terms of cosmic time and therefore required little attention.

Only when the preliminary checks were complete did the master intelligence that commanded the ship's main control room show signs of life.

Kraken's awakening began with the absorption of oxygen by his organic brain. The shutters that covered his optical sensors —his eyes — opened. He had not been designed and built by humans but, apart from his six manipulators, he was humanoid in appearance because his makers had discovered that a human shape was the most appropriate for a sophisticated, multiple function android with a highly-advanced intelligence. There the similarity ended: he possessed no human emotions other than a crude basic instinct of utter

ruthlessness and the more sophisticated ability of low cunning. Both of which had been considered necessary by his makers to ensure his survival. The nearest he came to human emotions was a measure of his makers' blind, driving ambition which they had reluctantly provided him with to improve his efficacy at serving their purpose.

Physically he was larger than any human and immensely more powerful. His height was ten feet and he possessed a formidable mass of 500 pounds. Despite his bulk, the advanced design of the servomotors buried within his massive armoured trunk was such that he could move faster than any of the secondary androids under his command. The clusters of Herculainium alloy fingers on the ends of his multi-jointed arms were capable of the delicacy of touch needed to manoeuvre the great ship, but they could, if he so desired, seize any of the control room androids and tear them to pieces.

Although fear was a human emotion, it manifested itself in the main control room androids because they had been programmed to ensure that they came to no harm, therefore, to avoid arousing Kraken's wrath, they took special care to subject all his orders to internal verification to be certain of carrying them out correctly.

There were seven of them in the ship's main control room, their less sophisticated brains becoming active more quickly than their master's brain so that they would be ready for his first orders.

When Kraken opened his eyes and dispassionately surveyed the console before him, it was of no interest how long he had spent strapped and comatose in his giant swivel chair. Ten years, ten centuries, ten thousand centuries — the passing of time was of no consequence. All that mattered to him was the condition of the ship and whether or not it was on course for its destination. His interrogation of the main control room's First Android satisfactorily answered a number of his immediate questions concerning the ship's condition.

"And the photonic drive?" he demanded.

The First Android did not know what condition the ship's main drive was in but knew enough about Kraken to sense that candour was decidedly risky. Its answer required careful consideration.

"Only you have the authority to order the testing of our main drive, Kraken," the First Android replied, bracing itself for trouble. "There have been no adverse reports from the service units therefore the probability is high that its condition is in the satisfactory state it was in when it was closed down."

Kraken digested this and reluctantly decided that the answer, although more verbose than he cared for, gave him insufficient grounds for tearing the First Android apart.

“Destination status?” he queried.

The First Android began to feel more confident. The first hurdle was over. “Everything is exactly as programmed before closedown, Kraken. We are on a solar orbit that will intersect the orbit of the third planet of this solar system within five thousand hours.”

Watched anxiously by the seven androids for the slightest sign of displeasure that could herald the sudden and noisy depletion of their numbers, Kraken rose to his feet and moved silently across the main control room to the navigation console. The Second Android manning the console moved hurriedly out of his way. Kraken studied the information on the visual display screens set into the console’s surface for some seconds. Everything appeared to be in order.

Kraken returned to his console and allowed the weak gravity to lower him into his chair. “Visual on third planet,” he commanded.

The First Android touched out the necessary commands. The hologram replication field hummed briefly. A blurred patch of coloured light shimmered in the field and rapidly hardened into an image of a shining blue-green planet and a smaller crater-scarred moon -both of which appeared to be suspended above Kraken’s control console. The angle in relation to the sun that the ship was approaching both bodies meant that they were reproduced in the replication field as crescents of light.

The beauty of the shining planet was wasted on Kraken. To him it was just a planet. The only thing that gave him a grudging moment of pleasure as he studied it was that it was a perfect match with the planet that his masters had instructed him to visit. He touched the controls on his desk and viewed the planet for a few seconds in the ultra violet spectrum before switching the replicator into the electromagnetic spectrum. The patterns of invisible radiation fields surrounding the planet appeared as coils of shimmering light. Their shape and intensity tallied with the data displayed on his information screen. There was no evidence of any artificially generated radio emissions but that was only to be expected. A faint outer halo of light encircling the planet caught his attention. He pointed.

“What’s that?”

“A dispersing band of plasma radiation,” the First Android answered.

“I can see that. It should not be there, should it?”

“No, Kraken.”

“Have you examined it?”

The First Android wondered if it was going to be blamed for the mysterious spiral of weak radiation.

“Yes, Kraken.”

Fortunately Kraken was too engrossed in the phenomenon to consider any form of direct action against his subordinates.

“Findings?”

“All the probabilities have been studied, Kraken. The highest one that correlates with the evidence is that a ship with a similar drive system to ours has visited the planet.”

“There is no such thing as another ship,” Kraken stated emphatically. “This is the only ship in existence.”

The First Android remained silent. The evidence that the third planet had been visited by another ship was irrefutable but it wasn’t prepared to argue the point with Kraken.

“Give me the rest of the data,” ordered Kraken.

“The plasma’s dissipation rate measurements indicate that the ship visited the planet four years ago,” said the First Android. It hesitated — sensing that the rest of the evidence might arouse the main control room commander’s grave displeasure.

“It went into an orbit around the planet?” the giant android demanded.

“Yes, Kraken. As you can see, the plasma belts consist of a double spiral - - one possibly caused by deceleration when the ship went into orbit, and the other caused by acceleration to escape velocity when it left orbit.”

“There is no other ship,” Kraken repeated, glaring at the First Android as though challenging it to an argument.

The First Android made no reply.

Kraken decided to carry out his own analysis of the mysterious radiation halo. He touched out the necessary controls and requested more detailed information. The results were not to his liking: not only had a starship visited the planet four and a half years’ previously, but the number of orbits that the ship had made of the planet to reach escape velocity suggested that it was a ship of a greater mass than his ship.

The columns of glowing figures on the navigation consoles reminded

Kraken that there were more pressing matters to deal with. He started issuing orders.

Thousands of selected directional thrusters set into the mighty ship's outer skin began burning. At first the collective thrust force of all the miniature darts of plasma thrust had no affect on the ship. An hour passed before the ship began to turn in relation to the sun, and it took a further four hours of careful control of the directional thrusters to complete the reorientation manoeuvre so that the ship's huge photonic drive outlets were aimed along its course.

When the complex computations were completed, Kraken touched the controls that fired the photonic drives. A stream of incandescent gas, over fifty miles long, blazed out from the ship.

Although the ship had been moving slowly in comparison with its maximum interstellar velocity of 90% of the speed of light, its mass was such that it was necessary to maintain the braking burn for 4000 hours to ensure that the ship would be captured by the gravitational field of the third planet.

"Inclined equatorial orbit stabilized at a height of one planetary diameter, Kraken," the First Android reported.

Kraken examined the infrared image of the ocean below that was displayed in the replication field. The uniqueness of the planet —that seven tenths of its surface was covered with water and that its atmosphere contained free oxygen — was of no interest to him even though what he was looking for could not exist on the planet without oxygen and water. His instructions did not require him to search for particular chemical compounds.

The display in front of Kraken winked through the rapidly changing longitude and latitude readings. The most important display of all, the biosphere analyzer, stated:

WATER — PRIMITIVE INTELLIGENT LIFE UNLIKELY.

Kraken sat watching with that boundless patience that only machines possess. The advantage of the inclined equatorial orbit was that the ship's position was concentrated over the temperate, sub-tropical and tropical regions of the planet where life was likely to flourish. Consequently it was a relatively simple operation to subject those regions to the most searching scrutiny.

Even so, the high angle orbit swept the ship close to the extremities of the northern pack-ice.

NORTH POLAR ICE — PRIMITIVE INTELLIGENT LIFE IMPOSSIBLE.

The frozen sea yielded to tundra and then to vast, sprawling forests

that smothered the terrain with a thousand shades of green.

PRIMITIVE INTELLIGENT LIFE POSSIBLE advised the display.

In another part of the ship secondary surveillance systems became active and flooded Kraken's domain with detailed information on the changing terrain rolling past 8,000 miles below. Some systems studied the configurations of rivers and streams, others scanned the patterns of infrared light emanating from the planet's lush vegetation. They were all searching for the same thing: the handprint on the topography that intelligent life would have made. Pointers to that evidence were the existence of straight lines. It did not matter what they were or how vague: the edge of a forest, the bank of a stream, an indistinct mark on the landscape. If it was straight, the ship would be interested.

Kraken and two other main control room androids sat motionless and silent before the displays. Occasionally they would reach out and touch a control to provide a visual close-up when something caught their interest. The phenomenon would be assessed, dismissed, and the long, painstaking search would continue.

Something registered on the 89th orbit when the ship was above a continental landmass in the southern hemisphere. Both Kraken and the First Android noticed it simultaneously.

Kraken instructed all levels of the ship's surveillance systems to lock-in on the phenomenon.

On the eastern coast of the landmass, a thousand miles south of the equator, was a quarter mile square of vegetation of an unnaturally even colour. The square was criss-crossed with what appeared to be a pattern of irrigation ditches. There seemed little doubt that it was an artificial field system. The high gain hologram close ups revealed a cluster of four small structures located in another clearing where the lush sub-tropical vegetation tried to crowd onto the beach. A humanoid lifeform was even spotted moving down the beach to where three smaller humanoids were splashing in the surf.

The larger creature's height and general size was easily gauged from the length and width of the shadow that it threw across the sand.

At the top of the beach, near the structures, were some enclosures which contained a number of animals. How many of the humanoid creatures lived in the tiny community was of no consequence as far as Kraken was concerned. All that mattered was that they existed and that he had found them.

It was time to communicate with his masters for further instructions.

Kraken knew little about his masters, and cared even less, but he did know that they possessed emotions. As he studied the diminutive figure walking down the beach, he correctly guessed that they would be well pleased.

Part One: Return

Astra reached the edge of the surf and watched her shrieking twins in amusement for some moments while enjoying the warmth of the setting sun on her back. Morning and evenings were the only times of day when the heat of the sun was tolerable. Like the children, she was naked apart from a pair of tough plastic sandals. The twins studiously ignored her and intensified their play in an attempt to increase her feelings of guilt when she summoned them from the water.

She felt something and looked down. Bran was piling wet sand onto her feet. She wriggled her toes and smiled down at the toddler.

“Hallo, Bran. Why aren’t you playing with Elka and Savin?”

The boy regarded her with a pair of large eyes that Astra always found disconcertingly expressionless for a three-year-old.

“Don’t want to,” he murmured, returning to his task of burying Astra’s feet.

Astra felt a movement in the sand covering her feet. She lifted one foot clear of the heap and was surprised to see an angry adult crab scuttle away and proceed to bury itself. The creature was too large to have got into the heap by accident. Bran watched it in disappointment.

“That was naughty, Bran,” Astra scolded. “It could’ve hurt me.”

Bran made no reply but continued to study the crab as it disappeared into the sand.

Astra returned her attention to the twins. Elka had stopped playing and was watching Bran intently.

“Come on you two,” Astra commanded. “Time for bed.”

There was a chorus of protests from the two children.

“Little more, mummy,” pleaded Elka.

“You’ve already had a little more. It’ll be dark soon. Now come on or do I have to drag you out?”

The twins realised the uselessness of further argument with their mother. They left the sea and took her outstretched hands.

“And you, young man,” said Astra, looking back at Bran as she and

the twins started up the beach to the huts.

"Mummy get me," said Bran sulkily without looking up from the new pile of wet sand he was building.

"Mummy's busy."

Bran stared at Astra with fathomless eyes. "Mummy get me," he repeated doggedly.

Astra sighed. She was about to scoop Bran under her arm when she heard Darv shout at her. She looked up. He was running towards them, waving frantically. She guessed from his expression that something was wrong.

"Sharna's started!" said Darv breathlessly.

"Is it definite this time?"

"Telson thinks so. He won't say — but I think there's something wrong."

"All right. You look after the children. Bran can sleep in our hut tonight."

Astra left the three children in Darv's care and ran up the beach to Telson's and Sharna's hut. The first thing she saw when she opened the hide-covered door was that Sharna's baby had just been born. Sharna was lying on her side, with her knees drawn up to her chin, on the pile of furs that served as a bed. She was moaning softly and clinging to Telson while he comforted her and tried to wipe the sweat from her body.

He looked up at Astra in relief when she entered the hut.

"Thank God," he said hoarsely. "I think it's due any minute now."

Astra made no reply but knelt down and carefully picked up the newborn baby boy. The infant was holding his arms up to his neck and was clenching the umbilical cord in his tiny fingers. Telson's eyes widened in shock when he saw the child.

"I had no idea," he whispered.

"Surely Sharna knew?" asked Astra, quickly disengaging the baby's fingers from the cord.

"I gave her some morphon an hour ago to help her sleep. I didn't know..." said Telson. He hesitated. "Is... Is it all right?"

As Astra handled the baby, so was immediately aware of a lifelessness about him and, as her eyes grew accustomed to the gloom in the hut, she had an uneasy feeling that there was something wrong with the colour of his skin. It was then that she saw that the umbilical cord was

twisted around the child's neck and was pulled so tight that it had virtually disappeared into the soft skin.

Astra broke the seals on a sterile scalpel that had been placed in the hut in readiness for the birth. She cut the cord in two places and carefully knotted the attached ends before disentangling the cord and holding the infant's head down to drain the fluid from his lungs. There was no reaction from the child: no kicking, no sudden movements of his head, and no sign of the powerful grip that she had learned was normal in newborn babies.

Sharna stirred and groaned softly. Telson tenderly wiped her forehead while keeping his eyes fixed on Astra as she tried to get the baby to breathe.

"Baby..." Sharna moaned. "Is it...?"

"Everything's all right, my love," said Telson soothingly.

Sharna tried to struggle up.

"Keep her still!" hissed Astra.

"Please, Sharna," said Telson gently, pressing Sharna back onto the furs. "Astra's here. Everything's all right."

Astra decided to use the emergency treatment that she had read about but never tried. She placed her lips over the child's mouth and nose and blew softly into his lungs. She remembered that the instructions had advocated great care when using this technique because of the danger of causing an embolism in a newborn baby's lungs. She felt the tiny form becoming cold as she held it against her skin and realised that the warmth in its body had been Sharna's warmth. Telson was staring at Astra — his eyes glazing with shock as he divined the message in her ashen expression.

Sharna twisted onto her back in an attempt to escape Telson's firm grip.

"It's my baby! I want to see it!"

"No, Sharna — please," pleaded Telson, pushing her back by her shoulders.

The drug and the birth had drained Sharna's strength. She sank back on the furs and said weakly: "Is it a...?"

"A boy, Sharna," said Astra.

At that moment the door swung open and Tidy trundled in. He had a brush in place in one of his manipulators. The android took one aghast look at the interior of the hut and said in a petulant voice: "Just look

at the dreadful mess you people have made in here. Just look at it. It'll take me hours to tidy up. Hours."

"You stupid android," snarled Telson. "Get out!"

"It's tidying time, Commander Telson."

"I said — get out!"

"Only following your instructions, commander."

"Out!"

Tidy had 360 degree vision and therefore did not possess a swiveling head that he could have tossed contemptuously. Instead, as he left the hut, he contented himself with: "How you humans can put up with such squalor is quite beyond me. All right. All right. I'm going."

Astra raised her head from the child and stared at Telson, not knowing what to say.

Telson nodded slowly and said quietly: "It's this planet."

"Don't be silly."

Telson gazed out of a ventilation slit cut into the hut's woven side to where a ribbon of darkening sea was visible. There was the faint sound of laughter from Darv and the children in the neighbouring hut.

"I tell you it's this planet, Astra. You lost one of your triplets."

"That was nothing to do with Paradise. And Sharna had no trouble with Bran."

"Why isn't he crying?" Sharna demanded suddenly.

Astra cradled the baby in her arms to hide him.

"He's dead, isn't he?" Sharna's voice was unexpectedly calm.

Telson looked questioningly at Astra who gave an almost imperceptible nod. He took hold of Sharna's hand and held it tightly.

"I want to hold him!" said Sharna, pushing herself up on her elbows.

"We did all we could," said Astra, covering the baby's face with her hand.

Telson helped Sharna into a sitting position. She stretched out her arms to Astra and the dead infant. "I want to hold him... Just for a minute... You can't deny me that."

The Wem's entry into the atmosphere blazed a trail of light across the night sky like a shooting star. At 1000 feet above the ocean, its onboard navigation system took over control from the ship for the final approach. The Wem levelled out, its two stubby wings giving its bloated, white-hot body just enough lift to ensure that it hit the water at the right angle.

The Wem was the result of 60 days intensive work by the ship's android production workshops. The workshops could normally turn out androids by the hundred each day provided they had the necessary raw materials. Manufacture of the Wem had taken longer than normal because the Wem was not a normal android. Like most planetary landers, it had been designed to withstand the harshest of environments ranging from the vacuum of an airless world to the surface pressures to be found on planets with atmospheres consisting of a thousand-mile depth of methane. There the similarity ended. The Wem was unlike those planetary landers which were designed to gather information. The Wem was very different.

At 500 feet it scanned the sea below and turned towards the beach so that it would hit the water parallel with the main swell to minimize the risk of damage to itself. It struck the water in a trough between two swells and bounced several times like a skimming stone before coming to rest, bobbing like a wounded fish in the moonlight. Its brain checked all its systems to ensure that all was well before it gave the commands to open the valves and flood the ballast tanks.

There was a soft bubbling hiss. The Wem started to sink. Five minutes later its obscene black body was submerged and the rolling swells were surging past its radio telemetry antenna. It continued sinking. After another five minutes there was nothing but a fine trail of bubbles to mark the presence on the planet of what was a sophisticated kidnapping machine.

* * * *

"Crazy, chimp!" said Darv laughingly as he swung the primate back onto its perch and held an admonishing finger under its nose. "Now you stay there and keep quiet or you're banned. Understood?"

The monkey took the hint and settled down to watch Darv finish reassembling one of the agricultural android's secondary

manipulators.

“Okay, George,” said Darv when the task was completed. “Try that.”

The heavy track-laying machine flexed the manipulator. “Still useless,” it grumbled, its harsh, metallic voice echoing in the emptiness of the shuttle’s freight bay. “Humans useless at repairing androids. Need proper service unit.”

“Sorry, George. We’re not on the Challenger now so you’ll just have to make do with me.”

Darv saw a movement and glanced towards the open ramp. Telson was walking along the path towards the shuttle.

“You’d better get on with your planting, George - the chief is coming.”

“No good expecting miracles from androids,” grated George as his multiple electromotors started whirring. Telson stepped to one side on the loading ramp to let the big machine trundle down into the clearing. He watched it disappear into the trees in the direction of the field and moved to Darv’s side to help him re-stow the tools.

“What’s the matter with George?”

“Nothing that new manipulator bearings won’t cure.” Darv grinned at Telson and added: “If we were to cannibalize this shuttle for spares...”

It was a subject that Darv and Telson had discussed several times during the four years they had been on the planet. Telson’s answer was unchanged. An emphatic, “No, Darv.”

“But—

“I don’t mind you using this freight bay as a workshop, provided you get Tidy to clear up after you, but I still intend to keep the shuttle in first class working order.”

“Also you want George and Tidy kept in first class working order. Well I need spares,” said Darv. He added, giving a good imitation of George’s grating voice: “No good expecting miracles from humans.”

Telson laughed. It was the first time Darv had heard him laugh since Sharna had lost her baby two months previously.

“So I can cannibalize the shuttle?” asked Darv hopefully.

“No.”

“But we’ll never need it again,” Darv protested. He waved his hands at the cavernous freight bay. “I mean — look at the size of it. We could all live in here in comfort instead of in the huts.”

Telson glanced around at the broad expanse of floor. It was true that

they could live comfortably in the bay, it measured 50 yards long by 8 yards wide, but it was an argument that he had steadfastly refused to listen to.

“Sorry, Darv, but as soon as we start living in the shuttle we’d lose our respect for it and in no time at all it would become unserviceable. I was the one who brought it down, remember, therefore I think I’ve a right to decide how we treat it.”

Darv returned the last of the tools to the stowage rack without answering. Telson’s entrenched opinion was hard to counter. Not only had he brought the freight shuttle safely down four years previously when they had left the Challenger, but Telson and Sharna brought with them a huge quantity of supplies, including the two androids — George and Tidy — and a garment-making android. The smaller shuttle that Darv and Astra used to escape from the Challenger had crashed into the sea with the loss of its supplies.

“Okay,” said Darv resignedly. “You’re the boss.”

“That’s right.”

“As a matter of interest — you know full well that there’s only enough fuel in its tanks for six climbs into orbit. So what do you think’s going to happen? That some alien spacecraft is going to call by? We’ve survived four years on Paradise so why won’t you and Sharna accept it as our home?”

“This planet isn’t Earth, Darv.”

Darv turned to face Telson. “Maybe the Earth we saw in the videos and holograms on the Challenger didn’t have a crater-scarred moon; maybe its surface wasn’t seven-tenths covered in water; maybe it wasn’t the third planet of its sun. But what was so magical about it?”

“There’s no was about it,” Telson commented. “The Earth is our true home.”

Darv snorted. “It was somewhere where our grandparents were born that they called Earth.” He pointed towards the open ramp and the forest beyond. “This is Earth for us now, Telson. It’s reality. It doesn’t consist of electronic shadows left on recording machines by people we never knew of a planet we’ve never seen.”

Telson was silent for a moment. “You’re right in some ways,” he conceded. “Earth doesn’t matter. What matters is people...” He regarded Darv thoughtfully. “Aren’t there times when you long to see the people of Earth? Our own kind?”

“I’m happy here.”

“Darv.”

“Well — yes — sometimes,” Darv amended, responding to Telson’s disbelieving tone. He grinned. “But there’ll be plenty of new faces when we’re grandparents. We might even end up as great-grandparents.”

“Don’t be too sure.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Sharna can’t have any more children.”

This was a blow. Darv looked sharply at Telson. “Is she certain?”

“Well I suppose so,” said Telson irritably. “I didn’t ask her to go into exact details.”

“Why not?”

“One doesn’t like to pry,” said Telson defensively.

Darv laughed. “You’ll never change, Telson. Astra and I discuss everything. We’ve an agreement — no secrets.”

The two men walked down the broad loading ramp and into the shadow cast by the huge freight shuttle crouching over them on its landing skids like a giant steel insect. The gleaming flying machine stood in its own clearing because Telson had instructed George to regularly cut back the encroaching vegetation. Darv opened a panel on one of the landing skid’s fairings.

“Come on, Charlie,” he called into the freight bay. “Out.”

The chimp scuttled out of the shuttle and disappeared chattering into the forest. Darv touched a control pad and the ramp started to close. The faint hiss of hydraulics stopped when the ramp was flush with the shuttle’s silvery outer hull.

“I would’ve thought that it was too early for Sharna to tell,” Darv observed as he and Telson followed the path through the forest, towards the sound of the breaking surf. “It’s only... What? Three months since she lost—”

“She says she’s certain,” said Telson abruptly.

“I’m sorry. I know how you both wanted a brother or sister for Bran.”

“Elka and Savin are four now,” said Telson.

“So?”

“Why is it that Astra hasn’t had any more children? She’s had four years to get over the loss of one the triplets.”

Darv chuckled. "Can you imagine three kids with all the trouble we're having with the twins? Little devils — the pair of them."

"But she is concerned," Telson pointed out. "She's spoken to Sharna about it."

"Yes — I know. But Astra would worry if she had nothing to worry about. There's plenty of time."

"Is there, Darv? Three children between the four of us and so far only one of them a girl? Supposing there's a disaster — an earthquake — and only one of them is left? How would you rate our chances of survival?"

"You're just looking for problems," said Darv dismissively.

"I don't have to look for them," Telson replied curtly, stepping over a fallen tree. "It's you who's ignoring them. Have you ever asked yourself what sort of future our children have on this planet?"

Darv began to get angry. "At least they've got a world of their own, Telson. An inheritance. That's a better start than the four of us had — orphans on the Challenger — brought up by a couple of megalomaniac computers like Angel One and Two."

Telson stopped walking and turned to face Darv. "Just suppose that there was an accident that left just one of our children as the sole survivor. The poor kid would be condemned to terrible solitude for the rest of his or her life. Would you like that to happen to Elka?"

Darv stared back at Telson.

"Well would you?"

Darv shook his head.

"I'll be honest with you," Telson muttered. "I never did like this planet. Sharna's always tried to make the best of it, but her feelings have changed since she lost the baby. Now... She hates it here..."

As with its two previous reconnoitres, the Wem waited until nightfall before emerging from the sea. It glided stealthily up the beach on silent tracks until it was several yards clear of the surf and stopped to survey its immediate surroundings. It had already learned that the animals on this planet had keen senses and could be belligerent as one particularly large creature had already demonstrated the night before.

Its infrared surveillance systems swept the terrain. The only animals nearby were those penned in the enclosure near the huts.

Satisfied that there was no danger, the Wem proceeded further up the beach in search of a good vantage point to make the detailed

recordings of the settlement that it would soon be needing.

* * * *

Astra woke and discovered that Darv wasn't at her side. He was sitting in his favourite chair — his first attempt at furniture-making — staring at the side of the hut. Charlie was also awake — sitting upright in his giant clam shell that served as a bed — grunting softly to himself. She listened for the regular breathing of the twins on the far side of the partition before speaking.

“Darv?”

“Mm?”

“Come to bed.”

“In a minute.”

Astra pushed the pelt bedcover aside and moved behind Darv, snaking her arms around his neck. “What are you doing?”

Darv covered her hands with his. “Thinking, my lovely.”

“What about?”

“Oh... Maxina must've had her cubs by now. I was wondering if she might bring them to us.”

“She always does. Anyway — you weren't really thinking about that lioness were you?”

Darv squeezed her hands affectionately. “No.”

Charlie became alert — bouncing up and down and chattering to himself. Astra knelt down beside his bed and calmed him down before sliding across the matting floor and resting her head on Darv's knee.

“So what were you thinking about?” she asked. “No secrets — remember.”

Darv briefly outlined his conversation with Telson.

“I thought Sharna had got over the shock by now,” said Astra when Darv had finished. “Obviously she hasn't. Telson's not very understanding, so I don't suppose he's much help. Anyway — maybe it'll be better if she doesn't have any more children if they're going to be like Bran.”

Darv looked puzzled. “I don't understand.”

“That boy is a sadistic little monster.”

Astra’s vehemence surprised Darv. “A three-year-old?” he queried.

“Listen a minute!” Astra turned her head towards the beach and listened intently. Charlie chattered again while looking fearfully towards the door. Astra waved a hand impatiently at him to be quiet.

“What’s the matter?” asked Darv.

“Listen!”

Darv listened. There was only the distant roar of surf.

“I thought I heard something moving on the beach... It’s gone now.”

“Probably Tidy.”

Astra accepted Darv’s possible explanation. Tidy even hated his owners making fresh footprints in the sand and had been known to labour through the night trying to brush the beach smooth even though he wasn’t programmed to work after dark.

“You were going to say something about Bran?” Darv prompted.

“That newly hatched chick he killed last month — it wasn’t an accident — he did it deliberately.”

Darv was about to protest but Astra cut him short. “I saw him do it, Darv. He didn’t tread on it, he stamped on it. Elka was nearby and she was horrified.”

“But he was upset afterwards. He was crying.”

“Because he realised that I’d seen him. He’s clever.”

“Did you tell Sharna?”

“What would be the point? Anyway, I didn’t want to add to her worries.”

“All kids are monsters,” Darv observed. “When I was Bran’s age, my old nursery android on the Challenger was always telling me how awful I was.”

“Savin or Elka would never do anything like that.”

Darv grinned. “Can you blame them? With you telling them that Angel One and Two will get them unless they’re good? You shouldn’t frighten them with those stories.”

“They enjoy them,” said Astra firmly. “And besides — it’s important that they’re told about the angels... Just in case.”

Darv broke the brief silence that followed. “We ought to have more children.”

“Not until the twins are older. Two give me enough headaches as it is.” Astra stood and pulled Darv to his feet. “Come on. Tomorrow’s a busy day.”

Darv was still awake ten minutes later — staring up at a chink in the roof where the moon was shining through. It was a reminder that the roof would have to be rethatched before the onset of the wet season — one of a seemingly endless series of jobs that needed to be done in the next few weeks. His thoughts turned again to the conversation earlier that day with Telson.

“Astra...”

“Try to sleep.”

“It all seems like a lifetime ago since we were on the Challenger... Do you think we did the right thing - coming here?”

Astra put an arm around Darv and pulled him close while she considered her answer. “Sometimes — when it’s cold, and the when the fire won’t burn properly because the wood’s too wet — that’s when I think back to my warm, comfortable cabin on the Challenger. And then, when I watch Elka and Savin playing in the sea — building sand castles — laughing, that’s when I think what might’ve happened to them if Angel One and Two had them under their control... We did the right thing, Darv. There was nothing else we could do... Except for one thing...”

“And what was that?”

There was an uncharacteristic hardness in Astra’s voice when she replied. “If we had discovered the computers’ central switching room and not Telson and Sharna — then I wouldn’t’ve hesitated in destroying Angel One and Two — no matter how hard they begged us to spare them.”

Darv sighed. “Well what does it matter now? After four years they and the Challenger will be billions of miles away by now.”

“I hope so.”

Darv yawned. “They’re busy looking for the real Earth. They want a developed planet to conquer. I don’t suppose they even think about us now.”

“I hope not, Darv.”

There was no answer: Darv was asleep.

The dawn light filtered down through the tepid, transparent depths to where the Wem lay on the sea floor, its grotesque body half-buried in a forest of seaweed that curled and heaved in time with the suck and drag of the crashing rollers breaking on the nearby beach. The weak sunlight shining on its photosensors produced a tiny electric current, which, when amplified, was enough to wake it.

The Wem carried out a series of tests on all its complex systems and decided that the time had come for it to move into shallower water in order to fulfill its task.

* * * *

“Bran!” shouted Sharna angrily, shading her eyes against the early morning sun. “You’re to stop throwing sand at Elka and Savin!”

Bran was standing up to his ankles in the surging tide, threatening the twins with a handful of oozing, wet sand. He pointed an accusing finger at Elka who was staring at him.

“Started it!” he cried defensively. Despite his view that Elka was to blame, he promptly hurled the splat of wet sand at Savin.

Sharna angrily splashed into the sea, gave her unrepentant son a resounding smack across the buttocks and dragged him out of the water by his arm. She thrust him down on the hot sand and glared at him. She walked up the beach to where the others were finishing breakfast in the shade of one of the huts.

“There’s a vicious streak in that child,” she declared, sitting down and picking up her half-eaten pineapple.

“Well he didn’t get it from me,” said Telson. “Tidy!”

The android trundled forward.

“What do you want?”

“You can start clearing away now.”

Tidy jabbed a manipulator at some dark stains on the sand where some goat’s milk had been spilt. “And what about that? How am I supposed to clear up that mess? And it’s no good you trying to bury it. I’ll still know it’s there.” With that the fastidious android gathered up the homemade earthenware bowls and went off muttering to himself.

Astra shaded her eyes and noticed that Savin was swimming further from the beach than she considered safe.

“Right,” said Telson briskly, checking some notes he had written on an everlasting pad. “Time for the morning briefing.”

Everyone looked bored. The after breakfast discussions were a daily ritual that Telson had insisted on observing ever since they had settled on Paradise.

“Today is Year Four, Day Ten,” Telson stated. “Agreed? Astra — I checked the calendar trees first thing this morning. You’re four days behind with the notches.”

“Go and speak to Savin,” said Astra to Darv. “He’s going too far out.”

Darv twisted round and watched the bobbing head in the sparkling sea for a moment. “Oh he’s okay — he’s turning into a strong little swimmer.”

“The briefing,” said Telson icily.

Darv grinned at him. “Sorry.”

“You’ll bring the calendar trees up-to-date today, Astra?”

Astra gave Telson a sweet smile. “Of course, commander.”

Telson made a neat tick against an entry on his pad.

“Oh look, Telson,” said Darv. “Let’s take the chronometers out of the shuttle. They’d last for eternity.”

“We leave all the shuttle’s fixture where they are,” Telson replied emphatically. Carving a notch on a tree each day isn’t much to ask, is it, Astra? Any reports, anyone?”

“The new salt pan George has excavated isn’t large enough,” said Sharna. “It’s producing just enough salt to fill a size One bowl each day. We’ll need twice that for salting vegetables for the next dry season.”

Telson made another note. “Okay. We’ll get George to excavate a larger salt pan.”

“We ought to do it ourselves,” said Darv.

“What’s the point when we’ve got George?” Telson inquired. “That’s why Sharna and I brought him with us.”

“Because it’s time we stopped depending on the androids. They won’t last for ever. How can we hope to teach our children how to manage without them when we don’t know ourselves?”

“That’s right,” said Tidy who was eavesdropping from his favourite

sulking position. “I don’t how you can expect me to carry on with this manipulator joint. What with cleaning up after your animals, and the sand and dirt getting everywhere.”

Telson counted up to ten. “Tidy — will you please be quiet!”

“It’s all right for you, commander. Sand doesn’t get into your bearings.” He waved a manipulator joint that was a sloppy fit where it was connected to his trunk. “Just look at that — well I ask you. And you’re all forever.

. .”

“Tidy,” said Sharna warningly.

“...treading sand into the huts — ruining my nice clean mats. I really don’t know why I bother to weave them. They make such a mess when they unravel-“

Telson jumped to his feet. “Go away before I turn you into a mess!”

“Sorry I spoke,” Tidy muttered, moving off. “No pleasing some humans.”

“We should’ve left him on the Challenger,” Telson growled.

“He can cook and he keeps the place clean and tidy,” said Sharna.

“And he’s right about that manipulator joint,” Darv added. “The main bearing’s badly worn. If I could remove one of the electric motors from the shuttle’s hydraulic systems, I could rig-up a lathe and make him a new bearing.”

“No,” said Telson curtly.

“Darv,” said Astra worriedly. “Go and speak to Savin. He takes more notice of you.”

“In that case,” said Darv, taking no notice of Astra, “we’ll have to close down George and Tidy and learn to live without them.”

“You’re being idiotic,” Sharna commented.

Darv sighed. “The longer we leave it, the harder we’re making it for ourselves when the androids pack up for good. They were designed to operate in the conditions aboard the Challenger —not under the conditions we get here.”

“George is an agricultural unit,” Telson pointed out. “He worked satisfactorily in the Challenger’s farm galleries.”

“You didn’t get thirty days of continuous rain in the farm galleries,”

Darv shot back. "Last wet season he was working in mud up to the top of his tracks when he was clearing the new field."

Sharna noticed that Bran had disobeyed her and was back in the sea - chucking sand at Elka. "Little devil," she muttered.

"Life's uncomfortable enough on this damned planet without you wanting to make it even moreso," grumbled Telson.

Darv stared incredulously at Telson for a moment and gestured at the flawless blue sky and azure sea. "You really can find fault with all this?"

"We could never plough fields or dig irrigation trenches or do any of the thousand and one jobs that the androids do," said Telson, adding pointedly: "And if we ate some of those animals instead of keeping them as pets, we wouldn't have to grow so many vegetables which also means that we wouldn't be so dependent on the androids."

There was a sudden, shrill scream from the children. It was not the scream of children's play, but one of abject terror. Elka run out of the sea sobbing hysterically.

"It's Savin!" cried Astra, jumping to her feet. "He's disappeared!"

* * * *

It was dark when Telson entered his and Sharna's hut. He sank tiredly into a chair and kicked off his sandals. His feet were raw and blistered from exposure to the sun.

There was no need for Sharna to ask how the evening's search had gone because his haggard expression told its own story. All through the long day the four adults had worked in relays in the burning sun in a fruitless search for Savin. Darv and Telson had spent most of the afternoon diving down into the depths from the log raft and had only stopped when forced to do so by aching ears and exhaustion.

Sharna poured out a mug of fruit juice and gave it to Telson without being asked. He sipped it gratefully.

"How are they?" he asked.

"Sleeping. I insisted that they both took a heavy dose of morphon." Sharna nodded to the partition. "Elka's in with Bran for tonight."

Telson nodded.

“It hasn’t really hit her yet, but it will tomorrow,” said Sharna. She yawned. “I only hope I’ll be able to sleep. This has been the longest day of my life.”

Telson pulled on his sandals and stood. “I’d better check the beach again.”

“Oh sit down — we can do it together first light.”

“If Sav— If... well — anything is washed up, I don’t want them finding-

_-

“We’ll be up before them,” Sharna interrupted. She looked searchingly at Telson. “Did you get anything out of Bran when you spoke to him?”

Telson hesitated while he marshalled his thoughts. He was uncertain how to begin. “Sharna — you may think I’m crazy, but I don’t think he was in a state of shock.”

“Well of course he was — Savin being taken by a shark right under his nose like that.”

“It wasn’t a shark,” said Telson. “There’s still no way a shark could get this side of the sandbar. Darv and I checked every inch of it. I don’t know what it was, but I do know that Bran wasn’t in a state of shock — at least not once he realised that he wasn’t being blamed for what happened — not that it stopped him making up one of his stories.”

“What did he say?”

“That Savin was about five yards away when suddenly he grew a new head.”

“What!”

“Wait until you hear the rest of it. He said that Savin grew a new head and then a steel claw went round Savin’s waist and pulled him underwater.”

Neither spoke for a while.

“And that’s all?” queried Sharna.

Telson nodded. “And then he wanted to know if Angel One had snatched Savin.”

“Poor Bran,” muttered Sharna.

“Why?”

“Well it’s obvious, isn’t it? Bran’s definitely in a state of shock. Why

else would he make up such an incredible story?"

Telson shook his head. "Let's face it, Sharna. Bran doesn't have to be in a state of shock to invent incredible stories."

Sharna was lost in thought for a few moments and then she came to a decision. "All right," she said, pulling on a jacket and a pair of trousers. "We'll check the beach now. There's a full moon so we won't need a lantern, and it'll give me time to think."

* * * *

It took Sharna and Telson an hour to reach the mass of half-buried boulders that marked the northern extremity of the two-mile wide bay. Nothing had escaped their attention during their careful search of the tidemark; every suspicious-looking pile of seaweed or water-sodden log on the broad sweep of moonlit sand had been investigated by them — their emotions a mixture of fear and hope - - and they had found nothing.

"I suppose we could check along there," said Telson, pointing to the fountains of silvery spray that garnished the foot of the cliffs.

"It'll be too dangerous at night," said Sharna practically.

Telson heard a faint whirring sound and quickly pulled Sharna into the shadows afforded by a pile of massive boulders.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Shh! Listen."

They both listened intently but all Sharna could hear was the sea exploding against the cliff. She was about to say something when she too heard a sound that didn't belong. It was a soft, swishing sound followed by a brief whirring noise. Then silence again. When it was repeated, it was much nearer — heading towards them. She took a hint from Telson and flattened herself against the boulder, her heart thumping wildly. The noise drew nearer until the machine, or whatever it was, suddenly stopped as if it had seen them.

"You two have made nasty footprints all over my beach," said Tidy's accusing voice. "I really don't know why I bother sometimes."

Telson and Sharna emerged from their hiding place and surveyed the android with a mixture of relief and dislike. It was clutching a besom in a manipulator and regarding them with the androidal equivalent of

straightforward loathing.

“Tidy,” said Sharna, trying to keep her voice steady. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to keep the place tidy. What does it look like?”

“At this time of night?” inquired Telson.

“Your orders, commander. Keep the place tidy. I have to work all hours if I’m to keep on top of everything. Though I’ve given up with the jungle. You can’t keep a jungle tidy what with all the birds, and things growing all the time.”

“But you’ve never worked at night before without specific programming,” said Sharna.

“I’ve never had a hulking great android tramping all over my beach at night before.”

Telson frowned. “But George doesn’t work on the beach.”

“Track marks up and down the beach,” continued Tidy indignantly. “Every night. It just doesn’t care.”

“What android?”

“The one that tramps up and down my beach every night.”

Telson rested a hand against the boulder and prayed for a measure of patience.

“How long has this been going on for?” asked Sharna.

“Four nights.”

“Where do the marks come from?”

“The sea.”

“And they go where?”

Tidy pointed in the direction of the huts. “About fifty yards up the beach.”

“Always at the same time each night?”

“I think so. Look — it’s no good you lot going on at me. I’m doing my best to keep this place tidy. I can’t help it if a stupid android—”

“No one’s going on at you,” Telson snapped.

“But why bother to keep the beach clean?” Sharna queried. “At this time of the month the tide would’ve wiped out the marks before dawn so we would never have known about them.”

“I would have known about them,” retorted Tidy with great dignity.

“And it’s getting worse. Tonight they went right up to the treeline. It’s a wonder I’ve not worn out my brush.”

“Where?” said Telson sharply. “Point.”

Tidy pointed to the dense vegetation beyond the huts.

There was a pause and then Sharna said: “This time we will need a lantern.”

* * * *

It was three hours before dawn when Sharna and Telson found Savin’s body by following the strange track marks in the soft ground beneath the trees. A strange design of breathing mask had been pulled back-to-front over his head and his waist bore marks that could have been made by an android’s manipulator.

Sharna held the lantern up while Telson turned the tiny body over. There were more of the regular marks across Savin’s back.

“So Bran was telling the truth,” breathed Telson as he straightened up and stared down at the pathetic sight. “Poor little mite.”

“What do we tell Darv and Astra?”

Telson shook his head slowly. “I don’t know. What I do know is that someone or something tried to kidnap Savin and killed him in the attempt.” He met Sharna’s gaze. “It means that we’re not as alone on this planet as we thought.”

* * * *

Darv, Astra, Sharna and Telson had been born on the Challenger and, because their parents and all the other human members of the starship’s crew had been killed shortly after their birth, they had known no influence during their formative years other than that of Angel One and Angel Two. Despite this, they knew from the videos and holograms in the Challenger’s library that their forebears had worshipped a deity that they believed to be responsible for the creation of the Universe.

Once the four had discovered that this deity was not the combined

force of the Angel One and Two, each had independently, and some cases, painfully, come to accept the simple beliefs of their parents: that there was a God that was beyond all understanding. If that God cared for the mortals he had created, they did not know; if there was such a thing as a soul, they did not know; if there was a life after death, they did not know.

But as they gathered around the tiny open grave in a clearing in the strange forest on a planet belonging to an obscure star on the fringe of the galaxy, it gave them a collective comfort and a strange, indefinable inner warmth, to believe that such things were within the realms of possibility. Nor did they know if the simple words that Telson recited over the grave before the dark soil cascaded onto matting-wrapped bundle would in any way help bring these things about. But they wanted it to be so. When such slender beliefs are born in adversity, instead of those feelings of bitterness —that is when the seeds of enduring faith are sown.

When all the soil had been returned to the grave, they stood quietly for a minute while the life of the forest — its birds and flying insects — pulsed around them. Even Bran and Elka remained still and quiet, holding their parents' hands.

At length Telson spoke. "I hope I didn't leave too much out," he said awkwardly. "It was as near to the recordings of burials as I can remember. We'll plant the tree next week — when the soil has settled."

"You did very well," said Astra. "Thank you."

Without a backward glance at the grave, they filed along the forest path back to their settlement.

* * * *

Over the midday meal Telson said: "From now on we never let Bran and Elka out of our sight, and we don't let them go in the sea — not even to paddle. I'll work out a rota so that one of us is always watching them. Whoever it is wears a PD weapon all the time. Agreed?"

There was a murmur of assent but not from Astra. "We've got to do more than that," she said quietly. "We've got to find and destroy the machine that killed my son."

Telson looked up at Darv. "You'd better tell her."

Darv took hold of Astra's hand and said gently: "Telson and I are taking the shuttle up this afternoon for an aerial survey of the entire area. If we find anything, we'll destroy it — I promise."

Astra's face creased in anxiety. "No, Darv — I don't want you to leave me. Not so soon..."

Darv kissed the palm of her hand. "There's not a wisp of cloud today, my love. We'll only be gone for three hours, and we'll leave you and Sharna a mobility suit radio to keep in constant touch."

* * * *

"Hi-gravity boosters?" called Telson, reading off from the checklist that was displayed on the control desk screen.

"Hi-gravity boosters — on," said Darv boredly as he touched out the initiation codes on the co-pilot's console. The laborious pre-flight checks had been going on for fifteen minutes. Normally they weren't necessary because the shuttle's flight and navigation computers would prevent the machine taking off if any of its systems were malfunctioning. Telson — always the cautious one — had insisted on a complete manual check just in case the four years inactivity in sub-tropical conditions had affected the shuttle in any way.

ALL SYSTEMS CONDITION GREEN appeared simultaneous on Darv's screen and Telson's screen.

"Fine," said Telson. "I'll load the inertials for a five minute hover at four thousand feet. Ready?"

Darv nodded.

"Ready?" Telson repeated testily.

"Ready!" Darv snapped back. "The damned thing can fly itself, so why the charade?"

Telson said nothing. His fingers moved over the touch-sensitive controls and the shuttle's chemical rocket engines came to life with a dull roar. The thrust built up rapidly. The displays that indicated the shuttle's weight winked to zero and then the unladen machine lifted smoothly above the treetops.

Downward visibility from the flightdeck — perched on top of the shuttle's bulbous body — was not good in level flight therefore Telson

banked the machine and allowed it to gain altitude in a slow, spiralling climb that gave both men a good view of the ground immediately below through the viewports on Darv's side.

"Beautiful," breathed Telson as he tested the controls. "You see? I was right to maintain her in good working order." He was particularly pleased that his fears about possible evaporation of fuel had been proved groundless — the totalisers showed the tank contents to be eighty-two per cent — the same figure as when he and Sharna had landed the shuttle on Paradise four years' previously.

The heady sensation of flying again helped Darv to forget about Savin for the time-being. He spotted Astra and Sharna on the beach, staring up at the shuttle. Bran and Elka were standing nearby. Elka waved. The field system of ripening cereal crops that George was tending was a conspicuous square of gold amid the greenery. Half a mile to the West of the settlement lay Land Mark Hill — its rounded, grass-covered slopes rising above the dense forest. The four tethered goats grazing on the lush grass paid no attention the roaring shuttle above their heads.

To the East the blue horizon dividing sea and sky receded as the shuttle climbed.

Telson touched Darv's elbow and pointed through one of the forward viewports. A family of elephants led by a bull with one tusk was crossing the stream about five miles from the settlement. "Looks like Bok is paying us one of his periodic visits," he observed.

Three years before, Darv had found the big elephant lying in the bush, half-dead from the effects of a fight — possibly with another bull. Some simple but effective surgery and a dose of antibiotics had saved the creature's life. Since then, in common with many other wild animals, Bok had become a frequent and welcome visitor. On each occasion, the old bull would nose around the clearing —examining every new structure with his sensitive trunk — before slinking back into the jungle as quietly as he had arrived.

The great beast's friendship reflected the rapport with nature that the four had established soon after their arrival on Paradise. Whether it was because they had opted for a predominantly vegetable and fruit diet, they did not know. But the wildlife had quickly recognised that the four new arrivals did not pose a threat, and a surprisingly large number of animals - such as the goats - had shown a remarkable willingness to be tamed.

"Top of climb — four thousand feet," said Telson. "Let's start searching."

All the shuttle's ground surveillance systems were switched on.

"Let's have the radar on as well in case it's a flying machine," Darv suggested.

Telson agreed, switched on the radar systems and called up Sharna.

"Go ahead, shuttle," Sharna replied.

"We're starting a five-minute search now."

"We can see and hear you, shuttle. Good luck."

Despite a meticulous search for marks on the landscape that even remotely resembled the marks that had been found near Savin's body, the two men found nothing. They even studied the terrain below in the infrared spectrum in case the machine had left a thermal wake. But there was nothing.

"We'll take her over the sea for a minute," said Telson. "From this height we can ought to be able see down to a depth of at least two-hundred feet."

He was about to operate the controls when the radar hazard alarm emitted a shrill whistle. Darv quickly cut the alarm and read out the figures that had appeared on his display:

"Bearing zero one..." said Darv, trying to keep the excitement out of his voice. "Elevation three five... It's well above the horizon."

"Lock the optical telescope onto it," Telson ordered.

Darv touched out the settings. The flight information data cleared from the screen in front of the two men and was replaced by a blank picture of clear blue sky. There was an indistinct dot in the precise centre of the screen. Darv tried to sharpen the image but the object was too far away. The shuttle's radar computers proceeded with an analysis of the object and printed out their findings along the foot of the screens:

RANGE - 15 000 MILES.

HEIGHT ABOVE SURFACE - 8000 MILES.

LENGTH - 14 000 YARDS.

DIAMETER - 1 000 YARDS.

FLIGHT MODE - 40 DEGREE INCLINED EQUATORIAL ORBITAL.

ORIGIN - NO INFORMATION. SYMMETRICAL CONFIGURATION SUGGESTS OBJECT TO BE ARTIFICIAL.

Darv and Telson exchanged stares and returned their attention to their screens.

“It’s the Challenger,” Darv whispered.

Telson shook his head. “It’s much too small — the Challenger was ten miles long, not seven.”

“We’ve got to take a closer look at it,” Darv declared.

“The fuel-“

“We’ve got plenty of fuel! We have to find out what that spacecraft is!”

Telson hesitated and then opened the communication circuit.

“Sharna.”

“Go ahead, shuttle,” answered Sharna’s voice.

“Sharna, we’ve found something so we’re going to investigate. It means going into orbit so we’ll be below the radio horizon for about three hours.”

“What is it?”

“We don’t know yet,” said Telson. “We’ll call you in three hours.” He cut the circuit without waiting for an answer. “Saves a lot of argument,” he muttered in answer to Darv’s questioning look. “Okay, Darv, pressurise the flight deck, close the micrometeoroid shields on the passenger cabin viewports, and load the inertials for a matching orbit with that thing.”

* * * *

For a few seconds Sharna and Astra risked diverting their attention from the children playing on the beach while Tidy kept watch on them. The two women shaded their eyes against the glare of the sun and watched the hovering shuttle as it lifted its nose. The whine of its engines rose to a continuous howl and the vectored thrust outlets vomited dense, billowing clouds of white exhaust gases. By the time the clouds were dispersed by the light breeze, the shuttle was a dot boring vertically into the blue, the roar of its engines dwindling rapidly to a muted, reverberating thunder that echoed around the bay.

* * * *

The mighty ship moved black and silent along its orbit above Paradise, ignoring the diminutive shuttle that had matched orbits with it and was slowly closing the fifty mile gap between the two craft.

"She looks new," observed Darv, studying the image on the screen before him.

"Hallo, spacecraft," said Telson for the tenth time. "Are you receiving me?"

As before, the only reply from the repeater speaker was the hiss of white noise. Telson gave a sigh of exasperation and closed the communication circuits. "Well they're not maintaining a listening watch."

"Or she's listening but not answering," Darv commented.

"What do you think of her?"

"Impressive. Those particle sweeps haven't seen much use."

"Which means that she could be near her home planet," said Telson.

"She's not using radar," said Darv. "There's nothing on the radiation monitors."

The two men studied the mysterious ship for two minutes without speaking.

"So what now?" inquired Darv.

Telson thought for a moment before answering. "Well we can't make out any fine detail at this range so we might as well wait until we're closer."

Darv looked worried. "You think that's wise? Going closer?"

Telson smiled. "It's not like you to counsel caution."

"She might not be talking to us because they've decided that they can't stand the sight of us. And if she's that new — maybe they're itching for a chance to try out their armament?"

"Let's get within ten miles of her and try calling her up again," suggested Telson.

* * * *

The Wem lay still on the seafloor.

It was in less than twenty feet of water and within fifty yards of the

shore which meant that it was obliged to anchor itself to a submerged rock with its powerful claws to prevent the eddies set up by the breaking waves from moving it about. It would have preferred to have hidden itself in the forest of kelp that carpeted the seafloor in the deeper water on the far side of the sandbar. It was the change in tactics of its prey had forced it to change its plans.

The Wem was puzzled: each day its sensitive microphones had registered the sounds made by the humans as they moved about in the water, and it had made its plans accordingly. Today they were making similar noises but they were staying out of the sea. Perhaps it was something to do with its abortive first attempt of the day before. The Wem did not know, nor did it have the intelligence levels to puzzle such things out. All it knew was that the humans disappeared at night and that the sun had already passed its zenith. Therefore, if the humans did not come to him, he had no choice but to go to them.

* * * *

The shuttle had moved close enough to be dwarfed by the mighty ship, and still it continued to ignore them despite Telson's attempts to contact it by broadcasting on every channel.

Steered by short bursts from its directional thrusters, the shuttle moved along the ship's curving flank like a gnat exploring an elephant.

"There's no doubt that she's new," Darv commented. "Look at her skin, no particle erosion, no scarring, nothing."

Telson had nothing to add. What Darv said was true: the ship could not possibly have done much travelling at near the speed of light, a velocity at which, judging by the size of her furled particle sweeps, she was obviously designed for. The ship's black outer skin was flawless in every respect.

Darv guided the shuttle towards the ship's yawning photonic drive outlets and into its darkside where its stupendous bulk obscured the sun. Telson switched on the shuttle's forward floodlights. The brilliant lamps bathed one of the ship's giant wing-like heat dissipation fins. Both men sucked in their breath in astonishment at what the lights revealed. Etched on the flat surface of the cooling fin in large white letters was a huge sign that read:

Underneath in smaller letters were the words:

23RD EARTH TRANS-GALACTIC SURVEY MISSION.

Darv was the first to speak when both men had recovered from their initial shock:

“Well,” he said with an air of resigned finality. “We don’t have to worry about searching for Earth anymore. Earth has found us.”

Part Two: Flood

Sharna and Astra heard the strange sound at the same time. They simultaneously snatched their PD weapons from their holsters and pointed them at the trees.

Sharna gave a nervous laugh of relief and lowered her weapon when she saw the cause of the noise, a bull elephant with one tusk, moving sedately down the beach towards them. She holstered her firearm and Astra did the same. “Now what,” Sharna commented caustically, “do you suppose Bok wants?”

“He’s limping,” observed Astra, and then she saw the deep, crater-like wound in his foreleg above the knee.

The great single-tusked beast stopped before the two women and regarded them with aged, thoughtful eyes, his huge ears spread wide and his long, sensitive trunk reaching out to gently caress Sharna’s and Astra’s face in turn.

“Watch the children, Tidy,” Sharna instructed, handing the android a PD weapon.

Tidy was not pleased to see Bok. He stood beneath the creature that was towering over him and announced that he, personally, would throw the elephant off the beach if it dared to make a mess.

“Just be quiet and watch the children,” Sharna snapped angrily. She turned her attention to Bok’s injury. “It’s a burn all right, a bad one too... Still — nothing that some tissue regenerator can’t cure”. She looked up at Astra. “It might take a little time. You’ve had a long day, so if you’d rather go and rest.

Astra shook her head. “I’m all right, Sharna — really. I’d like to help. I’d rather have something to take my mind off...” She hesitated. “You understand?”

Bok didn’t move when Sharna carefully probed the raw flesh. It was a strange injury, there was no damage to the surrounding tissue such as might be expected from an encounter with a crocodile. It was as if the flesh had been neatly dissolved in the one spot.

“A burn?” Astra queried, wondering how the elephant could tolerate the pain it must have been in with such stoic silence.

“Possibly. And yet Bok and his herd always stay well clear of our fires.

They're never away for much longer than a week, and we haven't had a forest fire for two years."

"And a forest fire burn wouldn't be so deep and in just one place," said Astra, studying the injury more closely and ignoring Bok's trunk that was sliding affectionately up and down her spine. "Sharna, it's been caused by a plasma discharge — someone has fired a PD weapon at him."

At first Sharna was inclined to scoff and then she realised that Astra could be right: the burn looked exactly like a PD injury. She frowned. "But who would've done such a thing? Telson may not be over-fond of any of the animals but he wouldn't shoot one of them. And Darv certainly wouldn't."

"Do you keep your PD weapons out of Bran's reach?"

Sharna looked sharply at Astra and said, slowly and deliberately: "What are you trying to tell me, Astra?"

Bok stirred restlessly. Sharna calmed him and repeated her question to Astra.

"You said yourself that there was an aggressive streak in him," Astra replied defensively.

Suddenly Bok lifted his trunk and trumpeted angrily. Narrowly avoiding the women and Tidy, he charged down the beach in the direction of the two children. Despite his great bulk, he moved with incredible speed, his huge feet pounding the baked beach, raising four wakes of swirling sand.

Sharna was the first to recover from the shock. She was a second ahead of Astra in dragging her PD weapon from its holster. She aimed at Bok and was about to fire when she saw that the great beast had passed the children and was heading straight at a monstrous apparition that was rising out of the sea.

* * * *

Telson was reluctant to take the shuttle any nearer than 200 yards of the mysterious black starship. He and Darv could do nothing except study the ship in complete bewilderment. There was no sign of life from it, none of the excursion doors were open, and the shuttle's radio receivers remained eerily silent.

"Maybe the crew are in suspended animation," suggested Telson as he

and Darv debated the enigmatic spacecraft.

“Surely they would’ve been revived before going into orbit around our planet?”

Telson shook his head, baffled. “The really odd thing is the design similarities between this ship and the Challenger — the photonic drive housing is virtually identical.”

There was a low hiss from the repeater speaker followed by a female voice. “This is Earthship Voyager 30 to spacecraft. Please identify yourself before approaching any closer.” Despite the proximity of the shuttle to the strange ship, the voice was indistinct and distorted.

Telson concealed his excitement and calmly opened the communication channels. “Hallo, Voyager 30. This is shuttle. You’re breaking up but understood. We are the descendants of a survey ship crew that left Earth one million years ago. Until we settled on this planet, we had been searching for Earth.”

There was a pause before the barely readable female voice replied. “Wait please, shuttle, while we check your craft’s configuration against records.” The speaker went dead.

“All that searching!” said Darv elatedly, grinning broadly at Telson. “All that trouble with Angel One and Two — and Earth finds us!”

Telson innate caution asserted itself. “They may not believe us if their records don’t go that far back,” he warned.

“They’ve got to believe us! They speak our language.”

“We speak their language.”

The speaker came to life again. Despite being garbled, it was possible to distinguish a more friendly tone in the voice. “Hallo, shuttle. This is Voyager 30. We have identified your spacecraft as a type of shuttle designed for the Challenger Class survey ships of the Third Millennium. How many are there in your party?”

“There’s six of us altogether,” Telson replied, thinking that the voice was referring to the population of the Paradise settlement rather than the number of those aboard the shuttle.

“Thank you, shuttle. How old are the children?”

Darv looked puzzled. He was about to say something but Telson had already answered the question with: “One is four years old and the other is a little younger. Our year is equal to—”

“What sexes are they?”

“One boy and one girl,” Telson replied. “Why the interest in our child

—,

“Our facilities for your children are limited,” the voice cut in, “but we will do our best, and our commander is looking forward to meeting you. We are opening the doors to our main shuttle excursion terminal. Message ends.”

Telson sat back in his seat and looked at Darv. “The moment of truth.”

Darv nodded. “Well let’s hope that they don’t mind the misunderstanding. They seem to be under the impression that we’re all on board.” He stiffened and pointed.

A brilliant white slit had appeared. The slit gradually widened and the two men realised that two large doors, shaped to matched the curvature of the black ship’s hull, were sliding slowly open.

Telson kept the forward lights burning and guided the shuttle into the ship’s interior. The excursion terminal was brilliantly lit but, like the ship’s exterior, was black and featureless. It was large enough to have comfortably accommodated 10 shuttles and yet — as Telson swung the hovering shuttle around in circle —there were no other craft in evidence. The excursion terminal was one vast, empty cavern.

The doors slid shut and Darv and Telson sat perfectly still, wondering what was going to happen next. The external environment indicators showed that gravity was being generated within the terminal and this was confirmed a moment later when the shuttle settled on its landing skids with a gentle bump. The introduction of an atmosphere was confirmed by a swelling roaring sound that continued for several seconds until the displays were showing an external pressure of one atmosphere. When the noise stopped the two men could hear strange, faraway music that rose and fell like a soft summer breeze.

“What do you make of that?” Darv queried.

Telson shrugged. Darv was about to close down the shuttle’s power supplies but Telson stopped him.

“Leave the inertial navigation computers live otherwise they’ll lose our position references. You can shut down the artificial gravity and the air-conditioning.”

“Okay,” said Darv, following orders and then releasing his seat restraint harness. He glanced through the view ports at the forbidding bulkheads and spotted the faint outline of several airlock doors. “They don’t seem very quick off the mark with their welcoming committees,” he observed. “Now what?”

“We’ll take a look outside but we’ll wear PD weapons.”

“Oh come on, Telson,” Darv protested. “We’re on an Earth ship, we can’t go down the shuttle’s steps waving PD weapons about.”

“I said wearing them, not holding them.”

Darv won the argument and a minute later both men moved aft into the deserted passenger cabin and went cautiously but unarmed down the shuttle’s long flight of folding steps. They stood at the foot of the steps, listening to the gentle hum of the strange music and waiting for something to happen. The lights in the terminal were flickering erratically. They called out several times but no-one answered.

Telson stooped down and examined the floor. “Similar material to the excursion terminal floors in the Challenger,” he commented. “And very poor welding at that. Look at this seam.”

“So where’s the reception party?” Darv complained. “I want to fall into someone’s arms and be greeted as a long-lost brother.”

“Don’t chuck your sense of humour about too much,” Telson warned. “They may be watching and listening and decide they’re better off letting you remain lost.” Despite the humorous response, Telson’s frowning expression indicated that he was concerned about their curious situation.

At that moment the music stopped and the lights began burning steadily.

“Darv,” said Telson uneasily. “I don’t like this place. I think we should leave.”

There were times when Telson’s caution drove Darv to despair. “Oh for God’s sake, Telson—”

Darv got no further because he was interrupted by a voice that he hadn’t heard in four years except when it returned to haunt his nightmares. It was the female voice of Angel One:

“Hallo, Commander Telson. Darv. Welcome back to the Challenger.”

* * * *

The Wem had encountered the elephant before but this time it was unsuccessful in dealing with the huge beast. It fired three plasma discharges into Bok’s chest and head but the enraged creature was upon it before it could fire a fourth bolt. With blood gushing from his terrible wounds, Bok’s momentum was sufficient for his tusk to smash

through the Wem's outer shielding. The ivory stiletto daggered straight into the android's organic brain. Bok strained his mighty neck muscles and half-lifted the android out of the sea but the machine's weight was too much for the tusk and it snapped off at the roots leaving the exposed nerve hanging raw and bloody like a scarlet thread. The white surf foaming around the two protagonists turned red from Bok's severed arteries, but it was as if the berserk, bellowing elephant was unharmed such was his fury as his massive, pounding feet trampled the machine into the sand, reducing it to a mangled mass of ironmongery.

Sharna, Astra and the two children watched in horrified silence as Bok staggered out of the sea. His trunk had been completely shot away by the android's second blast and the bones of his smashed ribs shone and white and grotesque through the mangled tissue of his heaving chest. He was ten yards clear of the water when he sank to his knees amid a pool of gushing blood that seeped rapidly into the sun-baked sand. He tried to struggle up and paused, bowing his head as if in deep thought. His chest stopped heaving and his front legs splayed slowly outwards, pushing the reddening sand into mounds. Then his eyelids drooped and he carefully rested his great head on its side.

Perhaps it was an undignified death for such a noble beast, but at least it was an honourable one.

Five minutes later, after much complaining about the affect that the seawater would have on his joints, Tidy waded out of the water clutching one of the strange android's severed manipulators and laid it at Sharna's and Astra's feet. Bran reached out a hand to touch the PD weapon that had been welded into place on the end of the manipulator but Astra pulled him away.

Tidy gazed askance at the sheer bulk of the elephant's mighty carcass. "And what, may I ask, do you intend doing about this?" he demanded of Astra. "I've never seen such a mess — all over my nice clean sand."

Astra rounded angrily on the android. "I'm not interested in your problems right now," she snapped.

"It'll be your problem when it attracts flies," Tidy retorted. "Just look at it. Sometimes I don't know why I bother."

"If you're so worried about it, you can bury it," said Sharna scathingly.

"Bury it! Me?"

Sharna ignored Tidy and knelt down to compare the destroyed android's PD weapon with her own firearm. The two weapons were

identical. She looked up at Astra whose face had gone equally pale at the discovery. The fact that the weapons matched had provided the unthinkable question with an equally unthinkable answer:

The Challenger had returned.

“What do you think of the Challenger’s new look, commander?” inquired Angel Two’s masculine voice.

Telson and Darv stared around the interior of the excursion terminal and located the source of the hated voice: a combined voice and vision terminal set flush into a nearby bulkhead.

“Very pretty, Angel Two,” Telson replied sarcastically. “There’s now no sign of the damage caused by the Great Meteoroid Strike, but what I want to know is what happened to our deal?”

“It’s been four years, commander,” was Angel Two’s smooth reply. “Angel One and I wanted to see how you were managing and to find out if you needed help.”

Darv gave a bitter laugh. “Credit us with some intelligence, Two. For your information we’re happy on Paradise and we’re managing very well.”

“Your expression suggests that you don’t share Darv’s enthusiasm for Paradise, commander. Perhaps you would like to tell us what you think of it?”

“I’ll tell you what I’m thinking,” said Telson savagely. “I’m thinking that it was stupid of me not to have destroyed you both when I had the chance. The deal was that you left us in peace to settle on this planet while you continued with the Earthsearch mission.”

“An agreement forced on us under duress, commander,” Angel One’s feminine voice chimed in. “But we do not hold it against you. We are still concerned for your welfare — especially now that you have children.”

Now we’re getting to it, thought Darv. “We’re all fit and well, One,” he stated. “Why didn’t you continue with the Earthsearch mission?”

“We decided that the Challenger was in no condition for an interstellar voyage,” Angel One answered. “The surgical androids manning the main control room were instructed to place the Challenger in an orbit around the sun on the far outskirts of this solar system. Thanks to the shuttles and planetary engineering equipment that Darv and Astra found when they discovered the terra-forming centre, we were able to extract all the raw materials needed for the refit from an asteroid. Two hundred service androids worked for a year. The damage caused by the Great Meteoroid Strike was repaired

by removing the entire centre section of the ship and rejoining it. That is why the Challenger is now much shorter than it was. Also, the interior of the ship has completely rebuilt.”

“So we see,” Telson observed. “But why change its name to Voyager 30?”

“A programming error in the team of service androids that worked on the outside of the ship,” said Angel One blandly.

“The same programming error that caused “23rd Earth Trans-Galactic Survey Mission” to be painted under the name?” asked Darv innocently.

Telson turned to the shuttle’s steps. “I see no point in remaining here a minute longer,” he said curtly. “I won’t wish you luck with your Earthsearch mission, One and Two. Come on, Darv.”

“Do you not wish to see what we have done to the ship, commander?” asked Angel One.

“No,” said Telson emphatically as he mounted the steps.

“Surely you would like to see over the Challenger, Darv? You were always the inquisitive one.”

Darv’s answer was the same as Telson’s as he followed him up the shuttle’s steps.

“But we have had a meal prepared for you all,” Angel One protested. “A special reunion meal.”

Darv leaned on the handrail and stared with undisguised distaste at the angels’ terminal. “We’re not interested. And how does one have a reunion meal with voices?”

“Commander Telson,” said Angel One. “You left the micrometeoroid shields closed on your cabin viewports. Astra and Sharna must be wondering what is happening. We are looking forward to seeing them again and, of course, we are especially looking forward to meeting the children.”

“Sorry - but they’re not with us,” said Telson. “Nor are Astra or Sharna.”

Despite her ability to think and react to information at a several hundred times the speed of the human brain, there was a noticeable pause before Angel One replied. “We do not understand you, commander. Before you boarded the Challenger, you said that they were with you.”

“A misunderstanding, One,” said Telson, touching the control pad so

that the shuttle's cabin airlock door hissed open. "Ready, Darv?"

"Goodbye, commander. Darv," said Angel One. "Naturally, we are delighted that you have settled happily on Paradise. The excursion terminal doors will open as soon as the atmospheric pressure is at zero."

* * * *

The events of the long day had hardened Darv's normally good-natured expression. As the shuttle swung from the Challenger, he was about to tell Telson that Astra would go insane when she heard that Angel One and Two had returned, when he noticed that the shuttle's navigation computer was flashing an error message on the display screen. Telson spotted the fault at the same moment.

"What's the matter with the damned thing?"

"We've lost our positional loading," said Darv, puzzled at the computer's failure to maintain running fix updates while the shuttle was in the Challenger's excursion terminal.

"You don't suppose those damned angels have interfered with it?"

"No. The shuttles onboard computers were always independent always independent of the Challenger's systems. It doesn't matter, I can reload the original position and make some inflight corrections before re-entry."

Telson orientated the spacecraft and set its guidance control computers for an automatic braking burn that would cancel the shuttle's orbital velocity and send it spiralling down into Paradise's atmosphere. He glanced up at the black silhouette of the receding starship and observed: "Now that they've completed their refit, maybe they'll be on their way."

Darv snorted. "You think so, Telson? They set up a neat little trap for us to walk into and then let us walk out again... They want something. Astra and I are no good to them because they know that we would never trust them again, and they can't trust you and Sharna because you know where their central switching room is. That leaves only Bran and Elka... Those two megalomaniac computers are after our children."

Angel One and Angel Two debated the failure of their plan to kidnap the children. The last message from the Wem, just before Telson and Darv had boarded the Challenger, was that it was being attacked by an animal. The angels had never held out great hopes for the machine because androids were cumbersome things when controlled at a distance, especially when they had been designed and built in a hurry. Nevertheless, they had hoped that the threat of the machine would have been enough to ensure that the humans stayed together at all times. They were particularly annoyed at the discovery that Telson and Darv had visited them alone.

Nevertheless, their scheme had not been a total failure because Darv's and Telson's visit had confirmed their theory that humans, unlike computers, were immune to the mysterious recurring radio assaults which were threatening to destroy all the Challenger's computer systems — including Angel One and Angel Two themselves.

From the angels' point of view, none of the attacks could be described as fortunate, yet it was fortuitous that one such attack had taken place while Telson and Darv were on board the Challenger. It had given Angel One a first hand opportunity to confirm that humans were unaffected by the strange transmissions. Angel Two had been unable to play a part in the observation of Telson and Darv because, being more susceptible to the attacks, his surveillance levels had been temporarily disabled.

The angels were convinced that the attacks would increase in frequency and severity until they were ultimately destroyed. They did not know whether or not the transmissions were aimed at them in particular or whether they permeated only this particular sector of the galaxy. All they knew was that it was vital that they track down and destroy their source before the transmissions destroyed them. For that they would need the help of humans. They only humans they knew were the settlers on Paradise. The problem was that Paradise was a safe refuge that the humans were now unlikely to leave of their own freewill.

There was only one course of action open to Angel One and Two:

They would have to make Paradise unsafe.

Telson was anxious to start the morning briefing as soon as Tidy had cleared away the remains of the breakfast. He had to wait impatiently while Astra and Sharna sorted out the inevitable dispute between Elka and Bran which had become a daily occurrence since Savin's death two weeks earlier. It was the usual problem:

"Don't wanna play with Bran," Elka wailed. "Want Savin."

"You'll do as you're told!" said Astra firmly but to no avail.

It took five minutes before an uneasy peace was restored between the two children and Sharna and Astra were able to sit at the table.

"Right," said Telson briskly. "We agreed to hold a special council if the Challenger was still in orbit after two weeks. Well — it's still there.

Darv nodded sagely. "Don't worry, Telson. I've got a brilliant plan to make the angels go away."

Telson regarded Darv expectantly. "Yes?"

Keeping a perfectly straight face, Darv said: "It's simple. We stand on the top of Landmark Hill and shake our fists at the Challenger as it passes by on every orbit."

Sharna and Astra suppressed involuntary giggles.

"I see," said Telson coldly, glaring at the two women before directing his sarcasm at Darv. "If that's the sort of contribution you're going to make, then—"

"The point is, Telson," Darv interrupted, "that there's nothing we can do about the Challenger is there?"

Telson ignored Darv and nodded to Sharna.

"On last night's check," said Sharna, consulting some notes she had made on an everlasting pad, "I discovered that the orbital change the Challenger started five days ago is now complete. It's in a circular polar orbit at a height of two thousand miles."

"A departure preparation?" Astra suggested.

Telson looked doubtful. "A lower orbit? Unlikely."

"I was about to close down the shuttle's power supplies," Sharna continued, "when I noticed a brilliant yellow glow low down in the southern sky where the Challenger was at that time. I switched on the receivers and discovered that the entire radio spectrum was flooded with radiations that were being transmitted from that direction."

There was a brief silence.

"It's obvious that they're up to something devilish," muttered Telson.

"But what can they do to us?" asked Darv, putting an arm around Astra whose face had paled noticeably during Sharna's report. "They can't use the ship's meteoroid annihilation shields to harm us because the atmosphere will prevent them coming in low enough to use them as weapons."

"You're forgetting the Challenger's terra-forming centre," Telson pointed out. "Weather control. Earthquake precipitation. That centre has all the technology that the angels need to re-engineer this planet."

"But why a polar orbit?" asked Astra.

"It's a useful orbit for intense planetary surveillance," said Darv.

"What about the obvious?" inquired Sharna.

Darv looked at her expectantly. "What's that?"

"A polar orbit could mean that our beloved angels are interested in the poles."

A slow grin spread across Darv's face. He slid his other arm around Sharna's waist. "You know something, Sharna? There are times when your genius completely overshadows Telson's ego."

* * * *

Darv ran his mobility suit gauntlet slowly along one of the tower's bracing struts and looked questioningly at Telson through the visor of his helmet. Both men were wearing space mobility suits as protection against the extreme cold.

The temperature was 50 degrees below freezing, the wind was gusting at up to 60 knots across the glacier and yet there was no ice on the 100-foot high tower. The steel latticework was fresh and gleaming. The shuttle with Astra, Sharna and the children on board was parked less than 100-yards away. It was twenty minutes since it had landed and already a film of ice was forming on its rocket exhausts.

Telson stared up at the soaring tower and turned to gaze at another of the towers that was just visible on the top on an ice plateau ten miles to the south. Before landing the shuttle they had spotted over a 100 of the strange structures dotted at regular intervals all over the southern ice-cap.

Telson shook his head. "Well I don't know what to make of them," he admitted.

Darv stooped and examined one of the uprights where it was embedded in the ice-cap. "I wonder how far down they go?"

"God knows."

"Do we look at the others?"

"What's the point? They all look identical."

Darv turned his attention to the dozens of android trackmarks that criss-crossed the ice all around the tower. The individual trackmarks were three times the span of his gauntlet. "Construction units," he observed. "About the same size as George at a guess. I reckon they must've landed at least twenty at each site."

"Let's get back inside," said Telson testily. "This cold is getting through my suit."

The two men returned to the warmth of the shuttle's flight deck.

"I've got some data on this ice-cap," said Sharna, looking up from the resources computer console when Darv and Telson had climbed out of their suits. "You won't believe this but the ice is two-miles thick where we're sitting."

"What am I supposed to say to that?" asked Telson wearily, gratefully accepting the hot drink that Astra offered him.

"Nothing," said Sharna. "But if that's the average thickness of the ice-cap over the entire continent, it adds up to a lot of ice. The sonargraphs show that the structure of that tower reaches down halfway to the continental bedrock. Astra's done some calculations."

Astra glanced at some notes she had made. "Taking the average intervals between those 56 towers we logged before we came out of sub-orbital flight, I estimate that there are 420 of them scattered over the entire continent. Landing beside each one to destroy them with our PD weapons would require ten times the fuel that we have at present."

Telson downed the rest of his drink and glanced at a chronometer. "That settles it then. There's nothing we can do about them. Challenger will be above the horizon in two hours so we'd better make ourselves scarce."

The rainy season broke nine weeks early bringing with it sullen skies that released an unending downpour of cold, driving rain. The stream that provided the settlers with an abundant supply of fresh water became a raging river that stained the sea orange with valuable nutrients leached out of the forest's soil. Each day brought more rain than the day before, and each day brought a further sinking of the settlers' spirits. Minor differences of opinion would quickly flare-up into blazing rows, and the enforced confinement in the huts made Bran and Elka querulous and impossible to please.

On the tenth day since the onset of the rains, the shuttle showed signs of sinking into the soft ground in its clearing. Telson was forced to burn precious fuel moving it to the firmer but more exposed ground on Landmark Hill.

The sodden thatched roof of Darv's and Astra's hut collapsed on the sixteenth day forcing both families to live in the one hut, bringing about a further deterioration of morale.

The hundreds of earthenware urns that Sharna and Astra had used for preserving fruit and vegetables were in danger of being washed away therefore Tidy dug them out of the sand and moved them into the hut - further reducing the already cramped living space.

Tidy treated the continuous rain as a personal affront, especially as his entire day consisted of emptying and positioning containers to catch the water that dribbled incessantly through the roof.

"I give up," he moaned. "I really do. This has been going on for five weeks. I can't spend all my time doing this. Someone will have to do something about this stupid roof."

"Shut up, Tidy," said Sharna irritably.

"It's all right for you," Tidy retorted. "I'm behind with everything as it is." The android returned to a theme that particularly rankled with him and one that he harped on at every opportunity. "I had to spend a week of my valuable time burying an elephant."

Sharna seized her PD weapon and levelled it at Tidy. "If you mention that damned elephant again, so help me, I'll blow you to pieces."

Tidy was unmoved by the threat. "Go ahead. See if I care. At least it won't be me that has to clear up the mess."

"Put it away, Sharna," said Astra quietly.

At that moment the door opened. The wind howled briefly around the interior of the hut as Darv and Telson entered. The water streamed off

their glistening plastic coveralls and made puddles on the floor matting.

"Wipe your—" began Tidy, and finished the sentence with a groan. "Some people just don't care."

"Well we can forget about saving the crops," said Telson bitterly. "Even if it stops raining tomorrow. George is now completely bogged down."

Sharna and Astra stared at the men in dismay even though the news was the blow they had been expecting.

"Which means that we have no choice but to go over to a meat diet," said Darv, pulling off his coveralls. "We've rounded up all the livestock and put them in a temporary pen on Landmark Hill. It's the best we can do until it eases up."

Astra shuddered. "I don't want to have to kill any of them."

"You don't mind us killing them for their skins and oil," Darv pointed out.

"That's not the same as eating them."

"If you'd all listen a minute," said Tidy.

"Well that's just too bad," said Telson in answer to Astra. "Because you don't have any choice. Once our stocks of preserves are finished we either eat those damned creatures or we starve. End of argument."

"Please listen," pleaded Tidy.

"Well I'm not going to kill them," Astra declared vehemently. "But put a PD weapon in Bran's hand and he'll do it cheerfully."

Sharna rounded on Astra, her face white with fury. "Just what the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"LISTEN!" yelled Tidy.

Elka started crying on the far side of the partition, and then Bran joined in. Sharna and Astra were about to launch themselves at each other but they were grabbed and held apart by Telson and Darv.

In that moment the four adults became aware of an ominous roaring noise that was getting steadily louder. It was coming from the wrong direction to be the sea.

"It's the river!" shouted Telson.

In that second a wall of black water smashed into the hut. The walls twisted under the impact and then collapsed, bringing the thatched roof crashing down. Sharna felt her feet sucked from underneath her

and then the swirling water was spinning her around. The icy coldness was a paralysing savage shock to her system that deprived her of the ability to cry out. She flailed blindly towards the sound of the screaming children but she was thrust aside by a sudden surge of the heavy earthenware urns. She fended the jostling urns away and was immediately badly winded by a roof timber that struck her in the stomach.

For precious seconds all she could do was cling in terror to the twisting timber that had hit her, unable to prevent herself from being swept away. How far and for how long she was borne along by the maddened flood waters she could not tell. The twisting maelstroms spun her helpless body first in one direction and then in another. She was vaguely aware of upright tree trunks flashing past in the darkness. The timber she was hanging onto suddenly stopped with a jolt that very nearly broke her grip. The timber was no longer moving but the water was charging past like a living creature, clawing at her clothing and trying to drag her body under as it swept over her, threatening to break the feverish grip of her fingers. Suddenly she was surrounded by dozens of the earthenware urns that she and Astra had filled with preserved fruit and vegetables. The heavy vessels jostled against her and it took all her fast-ebbing reserves of strength to fend them off with her feet.

Gradually the roar of rushing water died away and the current slackened. Sharna's groping feet encountered what felt like the branch of a tree. She wrapped her thighs around it and was able to consolidate her tenuous grip on the piece of timber.

After a few minutes she began to realise how cold she was. She tried to haul her body further out of the water and into the blinding rain but the leaden weight of her saturated furs took over and dragged her down again. There was nothing she could do but wait and pray.

* * * *

When dawn's frieze of light edged above the eastern horizon, Sharna was able to see for the first time that the roof timber she had been clinging to had jammed itself in the lower branches of a tree. She summoned all her reserves of strength and hauled her exhausted body into the safety of a fork in the branches. The timber drifted slowly away, there was now hardly any current. Even the wind had dropped although the rain was unceasing.

After half an hour she moved her aching limbs in an attempt to make herself more comfortable. There was a low growl from above. She looked up into the streaming rain and could discern the outline of an animal on a higher branch. As the light strengthened she saw that the creature was a leopard. Crouching beside it was a shivering rodent. It was then that Sharna realised that the branches of the tree were crowded with every conceivable species of creature from mice to the leopard. In the face of common danger, all the creatures had adopted a silent, but uneasy truce. It was the same on the neighbouring tree whose lower branches, some awash with the discoloured, sluggish floodwater, were providing a refuge for the forest's wildlife.

There was no sign of the settlement. All around were the tops of trees, rising above the water like strange bushes. Sharna screwed up her eyes and peered through the driving rain. From her vantage point, she could see that she was marooned in the centre of a new estuary where the stream had burst its banks and found a new route to the sea. A mile to her left were the hills, dominated by Landmark Hill which was crowned with the silvery bulk of the shuttle. On the lower slopes, above the flood line, were the makeshift pens that had been built for the livestock.

"There's Sharna!" cried a voice.

At first Sharna thought that fatigue was playing tricks with her imagination. And then the voice cried out again:

"Sharna!"

She twisted round and stared in the direction of the voice. Two figures were standing on an approaching raft, waving frantically to her.

It was Telson and Astra.

* * * *

"We all managed to hang onto the roof," Telson explained half an hour later as Astra wrapped Sharna in furs and tucked her into a bunk in the shuttle's passenger cabin. "As Tidy can see in the infrared, he was able to grab Bran and Elka before they were swept away. He tried to get to you but was too late."

"Typical," snorted Tidy who was eavesdropping as usual. "I do my best and what do I get? Nothing but complaints. There's no pleasing some people."

Telson sighed. "For the thousandth time, Tidy, no one's complaining."

"How are the children?" asked Sharna hollowly. She had been given a hot drink laced with morphon and could hardly keep her eyes open.

"Fine," said Astra. "A bit shaken but they'll get over it."

Sharna nodded. She was too exhausted to give any outward signs of her immense feeling of relief. Astra left Telson alone with Sharna and went down the spiral steps to the freight bay.

Telson stayed with Sharna for another five minutes. When he saw that she was sound asleep, he kissed her tenderly on the cheek and went down into the freight bay. The ramp was open. Darv and Astra were a hundred yards away, standing in the pouring rain on the grassy slope at the water's edge. Something had attracted their attention. They gestured excitedly to Telson.

When Telson joined them he immediately saw the object of their excitement: an island of floating vegetation that consisted of a tangled mass of broken branches and uprooted saplings that was moving against the sluggish current towards the hill. The three watched in astonishment as the island went aground. A familiar-looking manipulator arm appeared and then the island bulged upwards in the middle. There was a whirl of electric motors and George appeared, his churning tracks turning the floodwater to an even darker shade of muddy brown as he trundled ashore. He stopped, water streaming off his tank-like body.

"Too much rain," he grated. "Have to turn it off if you want anything to grow. No good expecting miracles from androids."

At that moment, after a downpour that had lasted forty days and forty nights, it stopped raining.

* * * *

During the following four days Darv and Telson laboured unceasingly to rescue as many stranded wild animals as possible from the surrounding flooded forest. Using a giant raft made by George from floating trees, they coerced the creatures out of the trees and ferried them to the safety of Land Mark Hill. One lucky find was Charlie, chattering with fear on a drifting log. They even recovered the leopard that had shared a tree with Sharna. Rescuing two orphaned elephants from a nearby hillock proved more difficult; the operation was only

brought to a successful conclusion after a series of mishaps that involved Tidy falling in the water on no less than four occasions. Unfortunately the diminutive android could not swim, therefore each ducking he received tended to enhance his already remarkable ability at registering vociferous complaints. His indignation came to a head after he was forced to spurn the amorous advances of a warthog.

“What I want to know,” he piped, glaring at the variety of animals grazing on the hillside, “is just how many animals you’re going to round-up? You can’t expect me to keep this hill tidy -not with all the messes they’re making.”

Telson pointed across the floodwater. “Tidy, you see that hillock over there? How would you like it all to yourself?”

“Very much,” was the android’s tart reply. “Away from all you dreadful people and all these disgusting animals.”

George rumbled ashore with Darv riding on his back. The big agricultural android was towing a raft piled high with urns of preserved food and bales of fodder that had been salvaged from the flood. As soon the raft grounded, George proceeded to stack the recovered supplies in neat rows on the hillside.

“About eighty urns and at least a hundred bales,” Darv reported.

“Excellent,” approved Telson.

Darv glanced up at the sky. There were patches of welcome blue where the sun was at last beginning to disperse the heavy cloudbank. “All the urns are intact and the bales should dry out in no time.”

Telson nodded. At least food was not an immediate problem either for the animals or the humans. The lions, jackals, leopards and other carnivorous creatures seemed content to feast on the carcass of a drowned elephant, and there was plenty of grazing on the broad slopes for the herbivores. Now that it had stopped raining, it was only a matter of time before the flood waters receded.

Sharna and Astra appeared with Bran and Elka, and Charlie trailing behind. The two women had been working on the eastern side of the hill. Their expressions were tense.

“Well?” asked Telson.

“Allowing for the effect of the tide, there’s been another two-foot rise in the mean water level since yesterday,” said Sharna expressionlessly.

“What!”

“But it stopped raining four days ago,” Darv protested. “It can’t still be rising.”

Astra shrugged. "Go and check the markers if you don't believe us."

"It's not possible," Telson muttered.

"It is if the angels are melting the southern ice-cap," Sharna retorted.

"You're being absurd," said Telson dismissively. "For one thing there can't be enough water locked up in the ice-cap to flood the entire planet."

"Not completely," said Astra. "But I ran some calculations on the shuttle's resources computer this morning. If all the ice was melted, sixty percent of the land on this planet would be flooded."

Darv was as incredulous as Telson. "The Challenger hasn't got the energy resources to melt the ice-cap," he objected. "You've only got to calculate the energy required to melt, say, half a cubic mile of ice to realise that-

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"None of us have the slightest idea of what the Challenger's terraforming centre is capable of," Sharna interrupted. "We only discovered it shortly before we left the ship. For all we know each one of those towers that the angels have planted could be powered by its own fusion reactor. And each tower could be pouring microwave energy into the surrounding ice."

Telson shook his head. "It's a lot of supposition, Sharna."

"I don't want to argue about it," said Sharna tiredly. "So let's see how much supposition there is in the marker readings tomorrow."

* * * *

The next day the markers indicated a three foot rise in the flood level which was followed by a further four feet rise the day after that.

The four settlers walked slowly along the edge of the flood line, discussing the problem. There was no longer any need for markers to show what was happening: Land Mark Hill's slopes had shrunk to an area of less than a square mile and bare patches of soil were appearing where the grass was being over-grazed.

"Fodder's going to be the immediate problem," said Darv.

“The animals will have to take care of themselves,” said Telson sourly. “What we have to consider is the children and ourselves.”

They stopped when they came to George. The android was standing idly with nothing to do. Darv stared at the vegetation floating by and had an idea. “George! I’ve got a job for you. Grab all the drifting trees that you can and strip them of their foliage and bale it as additional fodder. Any edible fruit and nuts you find should be saved. Tidy will help you.”

“Oh thanks,” said Tidy. “Just the sort of work I’m designed for. Anything else you’d like me to do while I’m at it? Like paint the sky green? Bury the odd elephant I find lying about?”

“You want me to start now?” growled the android.

“Yes, please. Think you can manage?”

“Try,” George grunted. “Androids better than humans but no use expecting miracles from them.”

“All that will give us is another two or three days,” Telson remarked.

Darv grinned amiably. “Which is two or three days more than we had before.”

* * * *

That night the water rose five feet. By noon, it had edged to within 100 yards of the shuttle.

Only a weak, sluggish current stirred the surface of the water. There was no longer a division between the estuary and the strangely calm sea; and the only remaining indication of where there had been land were the tops of the submerged forest’s taller trees. A small range of hills to the east had been the last to vanish beneath the surface of the rising waters. Even from the high vantage point of the shuttle’s flight deck where the settler’s had gathered, there was no sign of land in any direction. It was as if the whole world had become one vast, silent lake.

Sharna studied the figures displayed on the flight deck screen. “There’s the evidence,” she said, gesturing to the screen. “The salinity of the water is going down. There’s no doubt that the flood is being caused by freshwater.”

Telson took Sharna’s word for it. “So how much longer before we have

to find higher ground?" he asked.

"Six days," Astra replied.

Telson considered the information for a moment. "So we've got two options. Either we sit tight and hope that the water will stop rising within the next week..."

"Which is unlikely," said Astra. With quiet anger that hinted at her innermost feelings, she added: "Having gone this far, Angel One and Two won't turn back now."

"...or we use the last of the shuttle's fuel in a move to the mountains."

"Where there's no soil, and no snow at this time of year to provide us with drinking water," said Sharna. "At least we can use the shuttle's distillation plant here."

"There's a third option," said Darv.

Astra's scalp went back. "We're not going to surrender to the angels! Never!"

"No, my love. That's something we'll never do." Darv grinned at his companions. "Has it occurred to anyone that this shuttle will float?"

Telson opened his mouth to say something and shut it again.

"As a spacecraft," Darv continued, "it can be hermetically sealed anyway, and its weight is low in proportion to its volume so that its draught would be less than three feet. Work it out if you don't believe me."

Telson's frown cleared and he chuckled. "You know, Darv, you may have something."

"It would be too buoyant," Sharna objected. "It would float like a balloon and its circular hull means that it would roll in a storm, probably right over."

"Not with about three-hundred tonnes of ballast down in the freight bay."

"What sort of ballast?" asked Telson.

"Animals."

Telson groaned. "For a moment I thought you were trying to be sensible. Why animals when we can fill the bay with rocks, sand — anything that doesn't need food and water?"

Darv sat in one of the seats and allowed Charlie to climb onto his lap. He absently tickled the chimpanzee under the chin as he spoke. "The grazing animals can do something that we can't do —they can convert

the cellulose in vegetation into protein. We need protein to survive, and we've agreed that if we have to eat meat we will do so. You may not like the animals, Telson, but you've got admit that they're a valuable source of raw materials, bone, furs, fat, and so on. More important, if Paradise is going to be flooded, we owe it to ourselves and our children to save breeding pairs of as many species as possible." Darv paused and regarded each of his companions in turn. "We can't allow the angels to destroy millions of years of evolution without a fight."

* * * *

The animals entered the shuttle two by two. Graceful impala, their hooves scrabbling on the metal ramp as George ushered them into the freight bay; a lion and a lioness; a pair of cheetahs, snapping and snarling at the Darv's electric probe as they were prodded aboard; large animals — such as the pair of young elephants; smaller animals — such as a pair of lean jackals; very small animals such as bush babies and spider monkeys. Wildebeest, zebra, giraffe, ostrich: every pair of creatures that could be rescued in the time available was rounded-up, provided with a diet spiked with morphon to make them acquiescent, herded aboard the shuttle and ushered into hastily constructed stalls in the cavernous freight bay. A small number of birds were held captive in crude but effective cages. The last animals herded aboard had to wade through the floodwater that had crept over the top of Land Mark Hill and was covering the shuttle's landing skids. They climbed the ramp more willingly than the earlier creatures because the metal slope offered the only escape route from the water.

Telson leaned on the catwalk handrail overlooking the incredible scene below in the freight bay and wondered, for the hundredth time, if they were doing the right thing. The heads of the two giraffe were level with his own head. They regarded Telson with doleful expressions, their jaws champing rhythmically on the cud. One stopped champing. Telson watched in amazement as a bulge travelled down its neck and then travelled up again. The giraffe resumed champing. Telson reflected that the millions of years of evolution on Paradise had produced some very strange creatures. The strangest were indubitably the grotesque warthogs, both of whom had now fallen in love with Tidy and were driving the unfortunate android to distraction with their amorous attentions as he moved among the animals in his first of many valiant but despairing attempts to keep

the freight bay floor clean.

He glared up at Telson, waved a manipulator at the animals, and suggested that the entire operation was taking the idea of having pets around too far.

Darv appeared at his side. "All animals loaded, Telson."

"And the cold store?"

"Enough frozen elephant and rhino meat to feed the carnivores for three weeks, and enough fodder, fruit and nuts to last the others the same period."

Telson nodded, pleased. The operation had gone unexpectedly smoothly. "Well done, Darv."

Darv jerked his head in the direction of the flight deck. "The radio receiver lights are on again. All channels this time."

"They can stay on all day and all night for all I care," said Telson resolutely. "We're not talking to the Challenger."

Darv remained silent and reflected that Telson could be unexpectedly tough and inflexible when he was pushed into a corner.

"You think I'm wrong?" asked Telson.

"There's no harm in talking to them."

"Well you ask Astra if she wants to talk to them and see what sort of answer you get."

Darv smiled. "Point taken."

Telson stared for a moment at the floodwater that was lapping at the foot of the loading ramp. He turned away from the handrail and moved to the doorway that led through the passenger cabin and onto the flight deck. "You'd better call George aboard and seal up," he said.

The big agricultural android rumbled up the inclined loading ramp in response to Darv's order and took up his allotted parking position. Darv touched the control that closed the ramp. There was a soft hiss of hydraulics and the broad, drawbridge-like door hinged upwards into the closed position and automatically sealed itself.

* * * *

"Ninety-five percent loading on the landing skids," Sharna called out.

“We’ll be floating in an hour.”

Telson studied a picture of the port landing skids that was relayed from a retractable TV camera. The floodwater had risen around the skids and was touching the underside of the shuttle’s hull.

The chronometer’s digits winked through another fifteen minutes.

“Fifty percent,” called Sharna, a tiny tremor of excitement in her voice. The floodwater was now supporting half the shuttle’s weight. The skids were completely submerged.

Telson and Astra were gazing fixedly at the display that indicated the shuttle’s internal atmospheric pressure. The slightest increase in pressure meant that the shuttle’s hull was leaking below the waterline. The digits remained steady.

Five minutes slipped by.

“Still fifty percent,” said Sharna.

Darv had a vision of the water eventually submerging the shuttle because the landing skids were stuck fast in Land Mark Hill’s mud. He inwardly cursed his over-active imagination: the shuttle buoyancy was such that it had to float!

Elka entered the flight deck from the passenger cabin where she had been told to remain with Bran.

“Mummy — want to play please.”

“Not now, darling. Mummy’s busy.”

“Please.”

“Go back into the cabin and stay there!” Astra snapped. “Do as you’re told! This instant!”

“Still fifty percent,” Sharna reported.

Elka decided against arguing and returned to the passenger cabin.

A shudder ran through the shuttle’s hull.

“Thirty percent!” cried Sharna. “Twenty-five...! Twenty...! We’re going to do it!”

The shuttle lurched. A faint chorus of protests from the penned animals filtered from below into the flight deck.

“Ten percent!”

“She’s swinging!” cried Astra, pointing to the gyro-compass display.

Sharna gave a jubilant cry. “Zero percent! And look at that!”

The four settlers stared out through the forward viewports where the visible tops of several submerged trees were moving across their field of vision.

The tension on the flight deck snapped. The four delightedly hugged and kissed each other. Astra's relief was so overwhelming that she burst into tears of joy.

The shuttle was floating.

For the time-being they had defeated the guardian angels.

Part Three: Surrender

Darv used a wrench to forcibly hold down the lever that overrode the water strainer's automatic shut-off system. He nodded to Astra. "Okay, my love, try it now."

Astra touched the water distillation plant's start control. The pumps whined and there followed a nerve-grating shriek of tortured metal and seized bearings. The distillation plant's fault screen displayed a message:

MECHANICAL FAILURE STATUS: LEVEL B — CATASTROPHIC.
ASSIGN REPAIRS TO THREE GRADE A SERVICE ANDROIDS.

Astra hurriedly switched the system off and regarded Darv quizzically. "I was right, wasn't I, Darv? It's not the filter system, is it?"

"No," said Darv despondently, tossing the wrench on the metal floor.

Tidy gave an exclamation of annoyance. He picked up the wrench and was about to drop it in the toolbox when Darv snatched it back.

"I've not finished!" Darv snapped. "You can tidy up when I say."

"It's not his fault," said Astra reprovingly.

"That's right," agreed Tidy. "No need to shout. I do my best."

"Well it's someone's fault!" said Darv angrily. "We've now no means of making freshwater from seawater!"

Telson descended the ladder that led down into the confined space of the shuttle's plant room. "Any luck?" he inquired, looking at the dejected faces and guessing the answer.

"Not unless you've got a couple of Grade A service units hidden away somewhere," Darv muttered.

"It's as bad as that?"

"Worse."

It was out of character for Darv to be fatalistic. Telson's expression became serious. He crouched down and stared at the silent distillation plant. "What happened to it?"

"Someone came in here and operated the purification controls manually while the system was in the filter cleaning mode," Darv stated. "Everything afloat around us was sucked into the pumps and now they're finished."

“Do we know who did it?”

“No.”

“Well it wasn’t Bran,” said Telson firmly. “He’s been told never to come in here.”

Astra became angry. “And it wasn’t Elka, Telson. Unlike Bran, she always does as she’s told.”

“It doesn’t matter who it was,” interrupted Darv. “It’s done. We’ve now no distillation plant and therefore no drinking water production.”

Telson moved forward into the narrow gangway between the two huge freshwater tanks and inspected their manual gauges. The readings agreed with the information available on the flight deck. “Fifty tonnes,” he announced. “Enough to last the six of us well over a year, so there’s no immediate panic.”

Astra looked dismayed. “But we need five tonnes a day for the animals. The elephants alone need...” She broke off when she saw Telson shake his head. Darv looked guiltily away when she turned to him for support. She began to get angry. “You’re not thinking of throwing them into the sea are you, Telson? You can’t! Can he, Darv?”

“Be a good job,” muttered Tidy. “All that mess I have to keep cleaning up.”

Darv gave Astra a sorrowing look and shook his head sadly. “We’ve no choice, my lovely. We’ve no hope of repairing this plant.”

* * * *

Angel One and Angel Two observed the resourcefulness of the settlers in using their shuttle as an ark and were not pleased. They considered forcing their surrender by precipitating storms but realised that such a move would endanger the lives of the children. The children were the essential foundation of the new crew that the angels wished to build for the Challenger. Only by exploiting the immunity of a human crew would it be possible for the angels to seek and destroy the source of the mysterious attacks. When that was done the angels would be free to continue with their true mission: to find and conquer the real Earth.

They dispassionately watched the silvery ark drifting on the great flood they had engineered on the face of the planet. Further attempts to contact the settlers by radio failed to produce a response.

Surgeon-General Kraken, the android in command of the main control room, was instructed to take the Challenger down into a lower orbit around Paradise.

The angels had decided that the time had come to try new measures.

* * * *

“How much lower?” asked Telson.

Sharna touched out the necessary commands. The shuttle’s radar systems probed the Challenger as it rose above the horizon.

“She’s descended another fifty miles.”

Darv whistled. “Any lower and she’ll be into atmospheric drag.”

“And she’s still flooding the radio spectrum when she’s over the southern polar regions.”

“When will they give up?” asked Astra bitterly.

“They’re computers,” said Darv. “They have unlimited patience.”

A number of lights went out on the resources consoles and the central data screen flickered and then went blank. Sharna frowned. She was about to say that there had been a power failure when she noticed that all the power lights were still glowing.

“The screen’s gone dead,” said Sharna, puzzled. She touched a test key but nothing happened. “We’ve lost some computer functions. Correction - we’ve lost all computer functions!”

Telson leaned cross the pilot’s seat and powered up the flight control console. None of the computer standby neons came on. “Darv! Try the back-up levels!”

Darv’s results were the same: all the shuttle’s computer systems had crashed including the simple levels that controlled minor things such as lighting levels and temperature.

Telson looked up at the flickering light panels and experienced a strong sensation of dj vu.

“That’ll be Bran messing about in the auxiliary room,” said Astra vehemently.

“The computer systems are independent of the auxiliary room,” Sharna snapped back. “Why is it, Astra, that when anything goes

wrong, you always blame Bran?”

“Simple. Because he’s usually to blame!”

The dispute was about to develop into a fullscale row but at that moment the four settlers heard strange, faraway music. The haunting strains rose and fell and then swelled to a pulsating reverberation. The sounds came from no single source but seemed to permeate the air all around them. Telson and Darv stared at each other —in bewilderment at first, and then with realization as they read each other’s thoughts.

“Exactly the same sound we heard when we went back on board the Challenger,” said Telson.

Darv realised that Astra was trembling. He put a comforting arm around her and held her close.

“What are they doing to us, Darv?” she asked fearfully.

The ethereal music faded into silence. No one spoke for a few moments. The overhead light panels stopped flickering and, as one, all the computer lights came on and burned steadily.

“All systems on line,” reported Sharna. “So what was all that about?”

“It’s definitely the same noise Telson and I heard on the Challenger,” said Darv. He snapped his fingers. “And the lights in the excursion terminal were flickering just as ours were just now.”

Tidy burst into the flight deck. The hard-working little android was in a rage.

“That’s it!” he announced. “I’m finished with you lot. Through. Done.”

“You’re supposed to be looking after Bran and Elka,” Sharna retorted.

“I do my best for you dreadful people. I fetch and carry; clean up after you and your appalling children and all your disgusting pets; try to keep everything tidy. I’ve even had to bury an elephant. And do I complain? Never! And yet you’re always going on at me — plotting against me. Well now you’ve gone too far. This is an official complaint. Two complaints.”

After several attempts to interrupt the tirade, Telson told the seething android to go away.

“Not until I’ve lodged my complaints.”

“We better hear him out or we won’t get any lunch,” said Darv.

“Or dinner. Or supper. I do my best to keep ahead of my cleaning and tidying schedule despite these constant attempts at sabotage.”

“Tidy, what are you talking about?”

“And now you’ve started gagging me and messing up my co-ordination. It happened several times before the flood. They lasted for a few seconds and I was prepared to ignore them. But not this time.”

“Ignore what?” Telson almost shouted.

“Losing co-ordination like that and not being able to call for help. It’s disgraceful the way you treat me.”

“Tidy! What are you talking about?”

“Just as I thought. You want to gloat. That’s why I didn’t complain about the earlier instances.”

“We want to know what happened!”

Tidy calmed down a little when he realised that he had everyone’s attention. “All I know is that when it happens, suddenly I can’t speak or move. It’s dreadful. Dreadful.”

“Has the same thing happened to George?” asked Darv abruptly.

“Well — yes,” Tidy grudgingly admitted, not wishing to shift attention to the other android. “But not as badly.”

“Interesting,” said Darv thoughtfully.”

“Why?” asked Telson.

Darv hesitated before answering. “George isn’t as sophisticated as Tidy, but he does have some organic intelligence levels. But Angel One and Angel Two are nothing but organic intelligences... If that noise or transmission or whatever it caused Tidy to lose co-ordination — think of the effect it must’ve had on the guardian angels.”

Telson snorted. “They’re the cause of the transmissions.”

“They’re computers,” Darv countered. “So they’d be the last to jam organic computers. The lights were flickering on the Challenger, remember, and the angels didn’t answer us until after the noise had died away.” He grinned. “What’s the betting that those transmissions are giving the angels even bigger problems than they’re giving Tidy? My guess is that someone somewhere has got it in for freewill computers.”

Telson noticed that the android was digesting every word. “All right, Tidy. We’ll look into it. You can go back to the children.”

Tidy stood firm. “You haven’t heard my second complaint.”

Telson sighed.

“I’m not cleaning up the mess the flood’s made in the plant room,” the android declared.

“What mess?” asked Telson sharply. “The flood can’t’ve made a mess in the plant room.”

“The flood one of those dreadful children has made by opening the dump valves on the freshwater tanks.”

* * * *

Telson turned off both the dump valves which stopped the dribble of water from the two tanks. He inspected the gauges again and swore roundly. “We’ll have to get the distillation plant working somehow.”

“That’s impossible,” Darv replied.

Telson spun round to face Darv. “We’ve got to try! We’ve no drinking water! Not even a cupful.”

Darv made no reply. From above could be heard the wailing of the children as Sharna and Astra angrily questioned them.

Telson was about to argue but changed his mind. Instead he said: “What the hell do we do now?”

For once Darv was stuck for ideas and could only shake his head. Both men looked up as Sharna descended the ladder into the plant room. Her face was pale and drawn.

“It was Bran,” she said. “He’s just admitted to it. Elka had nothing to do with it. He said that watching the water running out of the tanks was fun.”

Telson swore again. “And he also wrecked the distillation plant?”

Sharna nodded and turned to Darv. “You better go and help Astra comfort Elka. She saw the whole thing and thinks we’re blaming her.”

Darv took the hint and climbed the ladder.

“It’s something we have to accept,” said Sharna to Telson as soon as they were alone.

“That we’ve no drinking water?”

“About Bran.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I think you do, Telson. It’s not just this. There’s been a whole string of incidents.”

“Minor incidents,” Telson interjected.

“But they all add up to—”

“Right now I’d like to strangle him,” growled Telson. “But you can’t read anything into the behaviour of a boy who’s not even four.”

“Do you love him?”

The question surprised Telson. “Do you?”

“I’m asking you,” Sharna replied evenly.

“Hardly when something like this happens.”

Sharna thought for a moment. When she spoke her voice was flat, unemotional. “I’ve never told you this before because I’ve always felt so terribly guilty about it, but I don’t love Bran in the same way that a mother ought to love her child — in the same way that Astra loves Elka.”

“Of course you do.”

“No — I don’t. Oh sure I pick him up now again and make a fuss of him because that’s what Astra does with Elka. But I’ve never done it because I’ve wanted to, and I know that Bran hates it when I do.”

“Well...” said Telson, unable to think of anything constructive to say. “Elka being a girl...”

Sharna shook her head. “It’s not that. It’s just that when I look into those expressionless eyes of his...” She broke off and stared at Telson. “Sometimes I can’t help wondering what it is that you and I have brought into the world.”

* * * *

Angel One was hardly affected by the attack but, from the time the transmission stopped, it took Angel Two five minutes to recover the use of all his damaged function levels. Android Surgeon-General Kraken had also sustained temporary damage with the result that the Challenger’s main control room was without effective command for eight minutes. When fully recovered, Kraken reported to the guardian angels that there was a possibility that the ship’s direction-finding systems could be modified to pin-point the source of the attacks. The angels agreed that the task should have top priority and four main control room androids were programmed to carry out the modifications. Another task that the guardians angels instigated was the construction of additional heavy shielding around their central

switching room. They realised that, at best, the extra screening was a short-term solution and was unlikely to remain effective as the Challenger neared the source of the transmissions. Also the Challenger's thousands of androids with organic intelligences would remain unprotected - - especially Kraken and his main control room androids. The future safety of the angels depended on getting the humans aboard. They considered the situation and decided that they had no choice but to resort to measures that would force Telson's capitulation even if they endangered the lives of the children. It was that or inevitable disaster.

Over the next three days the skies cleared and the shuttle drifted on a limpid sea under a burning sun with only the changing read-outs of the inertial navigation computers to show that the spacecraft was moving.

There was little that the four settlers could do to ease their waterless plight. Darv's idea of scraping the dew that formed at night on the shuttle's hull into containers caused more fluid losses in the form of sweat than was gained by the collection of the thin film of moisture. The most efficient way of obtaining dew was also the most undignified: it consisted of crawling out onto the hull at night and licking it off. Draining the dehumidifiers provided a meagre source of water but the shuttle's air-conditioning system was not designed to cope with a freight bay filled with animals therefore most of the moisture content of the shuttle's atmosphere escaped through hatches left open to alleviate the steadily increasing stink from the penned, restless creatures.

The smaller animals succumbed first to the lack of water and the rising temperature. On the third morning Tidy discovered that several monkeys and birds had died during the night. On the fifth day Sharna was horrified to discover that Bran and Elka had lost five pounds in weight each.

"We've got to talk to the angels," Telson declared, bringing the matter up as the first and most pressing subject during the morning briefing.

"No," said Astra. "We all agreed — no surrender."

"No one said anything about surrender," Telson replied testily. "But we should at least talk to them. They want to talk to us: the receiver lights are on all the time when the Challenger's above the horizon."

"Then why talk to them at all?" Astra demanded, her face white with anger. She turned to Darv for support.

"Telson's right," said Darv, avoiding Astra's gaze. "We ought to talk to them."

“We can’t! You promised!”

“I promised that we wouldn’t give into them,” said Telson curtly. I gave no guarantees about not talking to them.”

“For God’s sake, Astra,” Sharna intervened. “The children are losing weight.”

“It might rain soon!”

“And it might not,” Sharna retorted. “It doesn’t matter so much about us — we’re fully-grown, but a protracted period without water for the children will cause permanent damage to their health. I don’t want that on my conscience. I say we talk.”

Telson raised a questioning eyebrow at Darv.

“Talk,” muttered Darv.

“Astra?”

For a few seconds Astra gazed out of the flight deck’s viewports at the flawless sky, and then nodded. Without another word, Telson moved to the pilot’s seat and opened the communication channels.

“Shuttle to Challenger.”

“Hallo, shuttle,” was the immediate answer from Angel One’s voice.

“You’ve been trying to contact us,” said Telson. “Why?”

“We are most concerned for your safety, Telson.”

“Since when?”

“Since the onset of the flood, of course. We have done everything in our power to avert it, of course.”

Telson resisted an impulse to make a suitably cutting reply. Instead he said: “So why do you want to talk to us?”

“To warn you.”

“What about?”

“The storm.”

“What storm?”

“There’s a severe gale developing only five hundred miles south of your position,” said Angel One smoothly. “Your shuttle is not designed to withstand heavy seas. If the gale develops, the shuttle cannot possibly survive.”

“We’ve managed so far.”

“Open a vision channel please, commander,” Angel One requested.

Telson touched out the appropriate controls. A picture of a water-covered planet appeared on the main screen.

“You will find that what little land is visible will agree with your own topographic information on Paradise’s high ground,” continued Angel One’s voice. “What you can see are the tops of mountain ranges — otherwise virtually the entire planet is underwater. Are we agreed that you are looking at a live picture of your Paradise, commander?”

Telson glanced at Sharna who nodded to him. “We’re agreed,” said Telson tersely.

“The flashing point of light is your position,” stated Angel One. “Are we also agreed that it is correct?”

Telson checked the point of light against the navigation computer readings. “Agreed, Angel One.”

“We will now show you a closer picture of Paradise.”

The picture on the screen jumped to an enlarged image of Paradise that depicted the weather systems. The weather patterns were clearly shown, including a circulatory system south of the shuttle’s position that consisted of a twisting, snakelike spiral of gathering, menacing black clouds.

From their exploring days aboard the Challenger, the four knew enough about planetary weather systems to realise that the gale brewing to the south was an awesome unleashing of energy that the shuttle could not possibly survive.

A wipe bar traversed across the screen, trailing a new image showing the gale to have moved nearer the shuttle’s position.

“The gale is of your making, One,” accused Telson.

“I’m sorry you should think that, Telson.”

“I bet you are.”

“Our primary concern is for your safety.”

Telson refrained from giving a sarcastic laugh; the angels were aware of his feelings. He decided that it was time to get the angels to specify what they wanted. “What do you suggest we do, Angel One?”

“Do you have sufficient fuel for a climb into orbit?”

“Unladen — yes.”

“Do you need supplies?”

Telson guessed that Angel One was unaware of their freshwater crisis and said guardedly: “We’re managing but we’ve always room for fresh

supplies.”

“We will be pleased to supply anything you need before we leave, Telson.”

Telson was puzzled. “Before you leave, One?”

“We are continuing the Earthsearch mission. We suggest that you rendezvous in orbit with the Challenger and that we refuel and replenish your stores.”

Telson paused before replying. The others were listening intently to every word of the strange conversation. “We can’t do that, One.”

“Why not?”

“As I said, we’re laden.”

“With ballast presumably. Very sensible. Well now is the time to jettison it.”

Telson explained about the wild animals.

“Very well, Telson. We will despatch an android-controlled shuttle to land on the water by your shuttle in two hours.”

“No,” said Telson resolutely. “We will fly ourselves up to the Challenger using this shuttle and we will depart from dry land.”

“That won’t be possible.”

“Then you will make it possible, One. You brought about the flood, don’t waste my time by pretending innocence, therefore you can reverse the process and you can stop that storm. Is that not so?”

There was an almost imperceptible pause before Angel One answered. “Yes. But why are the animals important?”

“They took millions of years to evolve therefore we intend to see that they survive. We also want all the land covered by the flood to be restored.”

“It will take time.”

“So you’re admitting that you caused the flood?”

“We’re not admitting to anything, Telson. But we believe that the terra-forming centre has the resources to reverse the flood, although it may take several days to complete the operation.”

“How long is several days?”

“Six days from when we decide to proceed. If we decide to proceed.”

“We want this planet restored,” said Telson grimly.

“Whether or not we do so is entirely up to you, Telson. If you give your word that all of you will return to the Challenger, we give you our word that you and the animals will survive and that we will restore the planet. Do we have a deal?”

Telson looked at Astra but her expression told him that she had resigned herself to her fate. He said heavily: “We have a deal, Angel One. Now how do we get out of this present mess?”

“There is land fifty miles due west of your present position,” Angel One replied. “It is less than five square miles but that area will increase rapidly as the flood recedes. You may unload the animals there.”

Telson checked his mounting anger. Clearly the guardian angels had no idea of the predicament they were in. “We’re drifting, Angel One. How are we supposed to steer the shuttle?”

“Use your directional thrusters, Telson.”

* * * *

The promised land turned out to be a fragment of what had once been the highest part of the high veldt, but it was land. There were even a few patches of half dead grass and a number of stunted trees.

After their long captivity, the shuttle’s huge collection of thirst-maddened animals stampeded thankfully down the freight bay’s loading ramp. The tamed livestock stayed near the beached shuttle but the pairs of wild animals, such as the zebra, springbok, and the wildebeest, scattered. Not so much because they wished to get away from the shuttle but because they wished to break off diplomatic relations with a lion and lioness. As far as the two great cats were concerned, there had been too much lying down with lambs of late and there were a few scores to settle. Tidy set about the task of hosing the freight bay clean with seawater. He was well pleased. Convinced that at last his views regarding getting rid of the animals had been heeded, he offered no complaints about the unpleasant aspects of the work.

By evening the floodwater had retreated several yards from the shuttle.

“It could be the tide or it could be that the angels are keeping their promise,” commented Telson. “Let’s see what the high tide does

tomorrow.”

The settlers spent an uneasy night, taking it turns to comfort Bran and Elka who were, by now, crying and fretting most of the time, unable to sleep because of their nagging thirst.

The following day’s highwater mark demonstrated that the angels were keeping their promise, the flood was definitely receding and the tops of a few more tree had appeared.

“I wonder how they survived?” pondered Astra as a flock of strange land birds circled low over the new land as if not believing the evidence of their eyes before settling and scratching at the ground for insects.

“Perched on drifting trees and living off its grubs I suppose,” said Sharna, stooping to examine some newly exposed vegetation. “This grass looks like it might recover fairly quickly if there’s rain. The larger animals will have a thin time for a few months but I daresay they’ll survive.”

Charlie scrambled into Sharna’s arms and clung to her, chattering noisily, demanding food.

“The angels are keeping their side of the deal,” said Astra dejectedly, stroking the chimpanzee.

Sharna looked keenly at her. “Why that tone of voice?”

“Nothing.”

“You can’t fool me, Astra. I know you. You’re hoping that if everything returns to normal, that maybe Telson will renege on the deal with the angels. Well he won’t, and you know full well that he won’t. Firstly, because Telson isn’t one to go back on a deal, and secondly, because the angels could send us far worse than a flood if they wished.”

* * * *

The heavy plasma discharge projector had never been fired. George trundled down the freight bay’s loading ramp with the snub-barrelled device hanging from his primary manipulator arm. The projector had been designed for civil engineering purposes such as blasting roads and tunnels through mountains. It also made an admirable weapon.

“Okay,” said Telson, pointing to a knoll. “Set it down over there.”

George stood the projector on its four self-levelling pads and watched disinterestedly while Darv and Telson focussed the squat barrel on a nearby dead tree. Darv set the masks that controlled the shape of the plasma discharge beam and waited while Telson chased a goat away from the target zone. One of the bystanders was Bran, observing the proceedings with his large expressionless eyes as though not really interested in what the adults were doing, and yet not missing a single detail.

“Intensity level B, I think, Darv,” said Telson, moving well clear of the target.

Darv made the appropriate settings.

“Ready?”

Darv nodded, released the safety locks, and rested his hand on the discharge keypad.

“Fire!”

A narrow-angle beam blazed out of the focussing barrel and vaporised the dead tree. There was a dull boom as air imploded into the vacuum created by the beam.

Telson examined the target area with satisfaction: the tree was no more and the soil where it had been standing had been vitrified by the blast. He smiled at Darv.

“It works better than I thought it would.”

“What do you propose doing with it? Try to destroy the Challenger? Because if you are thinking of that, Telson, you ought to know that it’ll take a lot more than this—”

Telson held up a hand. “It’s insurance, Darv. I thought that it might be a good idea to rig it up in the freight bay — behind the ramp — just in case the guardian angels get too hospitable and don’t open the excursion terminal doors when we want to leave the Challenger. I may have promised that we would all return to the ship but I said nothing about us leaving again.”

Telson’s scheme seemed to sadden Darv.

“Don’t you approve?”

“Oh, I approve. It’s just that I thought that I was the one who was supposed to think up all the bright ideas. God only knows what’s going to happen to your ego now.”

The two men stared at other and then simultaneously burst out laughing.

By noon the next day, when the shuttle's preparations for lifting into orbit were nearly complete, the goat had sufficient time to turn what little grass she had found into milk. Tidy even recovered two hives complete with partly-filled honeycombs from the interior of one of the trees. There was insufficient milk and honey for the adults but enough to ensure that the children had a meal that was thirsty-quenching and nourishing.

While the final preparations for the lift-off were proceeding, Telson took Sharna to one side. "I want you to double-check the analysis levels on the resources computer," he said quietly.

"Why?"

"Because I'll want you to run sampling checks on all the food and freshwater that the angels supply us with. I'm not taking chances with drugged food and drink."

Sharna nodded. Telson's precautions were more than justified in the light of their previous dealings with the guardian angels.

It was late afternoon when the shuttle was ready for its rendezvous with the Challenger. The four settlers put Bran and Elka in Tidy's care in the passenger cabin, and said goodbye to Charlie. The chimpanzee sensed that he was being abandoned and sat by the shore line, sulking.

The four settlers took their seats on the flight deck. They were tense and nervous. Despite a small drink each of distilled water collected from the shuttle's dehumidifiers, their throats were dry and their tongues tended to stick to the roofs of their mouths. None of them spoke unless required to as part of the pre-flight checks.

"Ready for main engine burn," said Telson. "Strap in. I'm loading the inertials for a steep climb."

Five minutes later all the creatures that had been released from the shuttle stopped their scavenging and ran hither and thither in short-lived panic to escape the silver apparition that was lifting skywards, balancing its mass on a column of blazing exhaust gases.

Charlie didn't panic but sat on his rump, gazing upwards at the dwindling speck that was spearheading the spreading trail of flame and thunder accelerating into the blue.

Astra and Sharna forgot their thirst as their astonished gaze traversed the length of the great ship.

“That’s the Challenger?” queried Sharna, disbelievingly.

“That’s her,” Darv replied, freeing his tongue from the roof of his mouth.

“Where are the main control room viewports?” asked Astra.

Telson shrugged. “The angels have probably rebuilt the interior as well. Certainly the interior of the excursion terminal was different.”

There was a brief silence as Telson guided the shuttle to within fifty yards of the excursion terminal’s outer doors.

Angel One’s voice broke over the speaker. “Welcome to the Challenger. We’re opening the outer doors now.”

The speaker went dead. “Odd that we never hear Angel Two’s voice,” Sharna commented. Darv gave her a quick glance: the same thought had just crossed his mind.

A widening slit of brilliant light in the Challenger’s hull indicated where the excursion terminal doors were sliding open.

Bran managed to slip away from Tidy. He tiptoed silently down the flight deck’s central aisle and stood quietly between Darv and Telson, staring at the Challenger with large, expressionless eyes. Darv was uncomfortably aware of the boy’s presence and hoped that Telson would order him aft.

“He’s not doing any harm,” said Telson, not taking his eyes off the square of light shining out from the excursion terminal.

Steered by brief bursts of thrust, the shuttle entered the huge terminal. The doors were closing by the time the shuttle had turned round and was pointing at them. The artificial gravity generators came on under the terminal’s floor and pulled the shuttle down with a gentle bump.

There was the muffled roar of air entering the terminal and creating an atmosphere. Telson touched the controls that lowered the freight bay ramp thus exposing the excursion terminal doors to the plasma discharge projector. He also touched out the necessary commands that armed the projector so that it could, if the need arose, be fired from the flight deck.

“It’s nice to have you all aboard,” announced Angel One’s voice when

pressurization of the terminal was complete. "We are assuming that you are all aboard, of course?"

Darv heard Astra's sharp intake of breath and could well guess the effect that hearing an angels' voice terminal again had on her. "Why don't we hear Angel Two's voice these days?" he inquired.

"A service unit is about to be sent in to you with a meal. Is there anything special you would like?"

"Plenty of water for all six of us please, One," Telson answered. "Our dehumidifiers have been giving trouble. We're very dry."

"It will be attended to," promised Angel One. "We have had a new crew restaurant built during the refit. After your meal, we will discuss our mutual future."

"We'll eat here," said Telson firmly. "In the excursion terminal."

"Very well... It is already being arranged," was Angel One's smooth reply.

Sharna gave Astra an encouraging smile. "I feel exactly the same, Astra - hearing those terminals echoing at us again."

A service android appeared. It was a simple portaging unit carrying a folding table and six chairs which it set up near the foot of the shuttle's boarding steps before disappearing through a bulkhead hatchway.

At Telson's insistence, the four put on PD weapons before descending the steps, leaving Tidy to guard the flight deck. Telson and Darv were in the lead, followed by the children, with Sharna and Astra bringing up the rear. At the slightest sign of trouble, they planned to form a defensive circle, with Bran and Elka in the centre, and fight their way back onto the shuttle.

"They look fine, healthy children," Angel One's voice observed from a voice terminal.

Elka was frightened of the strange place and clung protectively to Astra. Bran showed no fear and took a marked interest in his surroundings. He studied every detail of the excursion terminal's interior. It was as if being on the Challenger had awakened something within him.

"I suppose we all might as well sit down," said Telson.

They took their seats at the table and waited.

"Dinner coming?" asked Elka hopefully.

"Soon," said Astra.

“With lots to drink?”

“With plenty to drink,” Astra confirmed.

The incongruity of the situation amused Darv. “Well,” he said, grinning around at everyone. “At least the years will enable us to recognise processed food if the angels try to feed it to us like they used to.”

“We eat nothing until Sharna’s vetted it,” ordered Telson.

The portaging unit reappeared laden with bowls of food, and carafes of water and fruit juice. Despite the settlers’ great thirst, the sight of the water did not cause them to lower their guard; they watched the portaging unit’s approach with great suspicion, their hands resting on their PD weapons.

The portaging unit deftly transferred the contents of its loaded pallet to the table. The last item was a tempting bowl of fruit which it placed in the centre of the table.

Sharna took a sample of each item and boarded the shuttle. Everyone sat gazing at the laden table — especially the water jugs.

“Trouble?” inquired Angel One.

“We hope not, One,” said Telson evenly.

Sharna appeared a few minutes later, all smiles. “Go ahead,” she said, rushing nimbly down the steps. “It’s all perfect.”

Everyone reached for their carafe of water.

* * * *

“Never did I ever dream it possible,” declared Darv, taking an apple from the fruit bowl, “that I would be able to say that a meal on the Challenger was the best meal I’ve ever eaten in my life.”

“We’re pleased to hear it, Darv,” said Angel One.

“And never did I ever think it possible that, once again, I would have to tolerate the voices of a couple of megalomaniac computers eavesdropping on everything I said.”

“I didn’t check all the fruit,” Sharna warned.

Darv examined the apple’s unblemished skin. “Straight from the farm galleries by the look of it. Remember the pulped and processed fruit

the angels used to feed us?”

“Don’t,” said Astra with feeling.

Darv was about to bite into the apple when he realised that it was vibrating in his fingers. The hum was suddenly a shriek. He gave a warning yell and was about to hurl the fruit across the terminal when it exploded in his hand — blasting a cloud of dense, bright green gas in everyone’s face.

* * * *

Android Surgeon-General Kraken moved his towering bulk across main control room and addressed the terminal that linked him to his masters.

“I have information,” the giant android announced.

“Go ahead, Kraken,” responded Angel Two.

“Reference the last attack transmission. Regeneration of the computers that control the direction finding systems is complete.”

“Excellent, Kraken. We are well pleased.”

“The subsystems covering Sector Seven of this galaxy sustained the most damage.”

“Conclusions?”

“Sector Seven is where the attacks are being beamed from,” stated Kraken.

The guardian angels conferred while Kraken awaited further instructions. The angels decided that there were two possibilities concerning the source of the attacks that were threatening to destroy them. Either Sector Seven was where the true Earth was and Earth was responsible for the attacks, or they were being broadcast by an alien technology.

On detailed analysis, the angels ruled out Earth as the offender because of their prediction that the Earth was emerging from a new Dark Age and therefore would not have the technology to combat computers at a range of several light years. But whoever it was had to be destroyed. Therefore Sector Seven would have to be the Challenger’s next destination.

“Sector Seven is a group of stars at a distance of eleven light-years,”

Kraken stated when he received his orders. "Six months acceleration to cruising velocity, fifteen years at cruising velocity, and a further six month deceleration will take us into Sector Seven space in sixteen years."

"You may proceed now," instructed Angel One.

"Problem," said Kraken. "As we approach Sector Seven, the attacks will become stronger. There will be damage to all systems."

"You need not worry," Angel One answered. "We now have the necessary humans to form the nucleus of an immune crew."

"They will be under my command?" Kraken demanded suspiciously.

"Eventually, Kraken, when they are older. My preliminary examination of them through a nursery android suggests that they will be ideal for our purpose."

* * * *

Astra hovered in the twilight world between sleep and wakefulness, her brain trying to puzzle out why she was so comfortable. Her body was not contact with the coarseness of the inexpertly cured pelts to which she had become accustomed, and the pillow was soft - remolding itself to her head whenever she moved. She opened her eyes and gazed up at the palm thatching, and then realized that she wasn't looking at thatching. Suddenly she was wide awake, sitting up in the strange bed, staring round the cabin interior and frantically shaking Darv's shoulder.

The arm that emerged from under the bedcover was the colour of death. As Darv lifted himself blearily onto one elbow and focussed his eyes, she saw that his entire body was white, the nut-brown weathering of his skin caused by four years on Paradise was no more. And then she saw that her own body was the same colour.

"Ha!" Tidy grunted. "You're awake at last. About time too. Not that I mind you sleeping. At least you can't go messing the place up when you're asleep."

Darv and Astra stared at the diminutive android who was standing at the foot of the bed.

"What happened?" asked Darv.

Tidy became indignant. "What happened? You have the nerve to go to

sleep when the excitement starts and then you expect me to have to tell you what happened?"

"Where's Elka!" demanded Astra. She tried to struggle out of bed but her legs buckled under her and she fell back.

"Just keep still for a while, my lovely," advised Darv.

"What happened to us?" Astra moaned.

"The apple I picked up exploded and released a gas. Remember?"

"Elka and Bran are safe," said Tidy.

"And Sharna and Telson?"

Tidy jabbed a manipulator at the bulkhead behind Darv's head. "In the next cabin. I was just going to look in on them when you finally decided to wake up."

"Who brought us here?"

"I did," said Tidy. "Although I don't know why I bother. I must've looked in on you hundreds of times since—"

"Wait a minute. Wait a minute," said Darv, trying to clear his head. "How long have we been in here?"

"Ten hours."

"Then how could you have looked in on us hundreds of time?"

"I'm including all the times I used to look in on you when you were floating in the nutrient tanks in the suspended animation chambers!" the android snapped back.

Astra and Darv stared at Tidy. "Nutrient tanks?" Darv echoed.

"Everyday I looked on you. Every single day! And do I hear your profuse thanks?"

Darv spoke slowly and carefully. "Listen, Tidy. Are you saying that we've been in suspended animation?"

"Well of course you have, otherwise what were the four of you doing in the suspended animation chamber?"

Astra closed her eyes. It was all a nightmare and she would eventually wake up on Paradise.

"How long were we in suspended animation for?" asked Darv, keeping his voice calm and steady.

Tidy considered. "I suppose I could run a count on the number of visits I made... One visit each day... 5940 visits... That's just over sixteen years."

Astra rose to her knees and stared at Tidy, a wild, terrified look in her eyes. "You're lying!" she spat. "You're paying us out by trying to frighten us!"

Tidy made no reply but moved to the threshold that led into the corridor.

"Tidy!" Darv commanded. "Wait a minute!"

The android stopped and regarded Darv. "What?"

"You said that there were four of us in the suspended animation chamber?"

"That's right."

"No," whispered Astra, shaking her head. "He's got to be lying."

"Who were the other two?"

Tidy waved a manipulator at the bulkhead again. "Sharna and Telson."

"And Elka and Bran?" said Darv expressionlessly, guessing what the hideous truth would be. "Weren't they put into suspended animation?"

"No," said Tidy. "They've aged at the normal rate. They're nineteen years old now. Elka's nearly twenty."

Part Four Solaria

Acting on the instructions of the guardian angels, Android Surgeon-General Kraken decelerated the Challenger and stood the starship off from the group of stars known as Sector Seven at a distance of one light-year. The angels were reluctant to approach any nearer because their suspicions were aroused; they were convinced that Sector Seven was the source of the jamming attacks and yet there had been no further major transmissions during the fifteen years that the Challenger had been journeying towards Sector Seven, only a series of low power, seemingly random attacks that had caused minimal interference with some androids and had damaged Angel Two's speech facilities.

The random nature of the low power attacks was in itself suspicious. The angels reasoned that perhaps the intelligences responsible for the attacks had decided to allow the Challenger to get close to Sector Seven before transmitting one devastating blast that would obliterate every organic computer system on board the ship.

The angels' last hope lay with the six humans. The sighting of a strange artifact drifting 100,000 miles away from the ship gave them an idea and they decided that the time had come for them to exploit the immunity to the attacks that the humans possessed.

* * * *

Sharna and Telson stopped at a corridor junction and looked questioning at one another. Tidy nearly cannoned into them while Darv and Astra brought up the rear.

"Well?" demanded Darv.

"We're not sure," Telson confessed. "It's been so long and there's been so many changes." He peered up and down the dimly-lit corridor. "We'll never be able to find our way about the ship again. Tidy!"

"What?"

"Are you logging every turn we make?"

“Yes. Unlike some people, I’ve no intention of getting lost.”

“Let’s try this way,” said Sharna decisively, moving off. “If I’m wrong, we can always double back.”

They half-ran, half-walked for another five minutes, taking left turns and then right turns, following the dictates of Sharna’s instincts in their search for the guardian angels’ central switching room.

Once the four had fully recovered and had taken stock of their situation, it was Telson who had decreed that the first priority was the destruction of the angels by smashing their way into the angels’ central switching room. Four years’ previously, nineteen years if the sixteen years spent in suspended animation were taken into consideration, Telson and Sharna had discovered the angels’ central switching room despite the hallucinatory nightmare barriers that the angels employed to guard their vulnerable intelligence centre. Inside the room the couple had discovered the two organic brains, floating in a nutrient tank like a pair of bloated organs awaiting a transplant operation. Two blows would have been sufficient to have destroyed the guardian angels but Telson had acceded to their pleas that he spare them.

This time, he reflected grimly, as he strode along the corridor with the others, there would be no hesitation; entities that would irrevocably deprive parents of the pleasure of seeing their children growing up deserved no mercy.

“What happened to George?” asked Astra.

“Sent back to a farm gallery,” was Tidy’s laconic answer.

“What do you all think you’re looking for?” inquired Angel One mildly.

“No one is to answer!” commanded Telson.

Angel One repeated her inquiry but was ignored.

“This is the corridor!” said Sharna excitedly, quickening her pace.

Telson was about to protest that everything had been altered - even the dimensions of the corridor — when they came to the circular steel door that he remembered so well. The stencilled letters, painted on the door by a long-dead engineer, had faded but it was still possible to decipher them: ANCILLARY GUARDIANS OF ENVIRONMENT AND LIFE. CENTRAL SWITCHING ROOM. (AN.G.E.L System 1). (AN.G.E.L System 2)

“That’s it?” said Darv incredulously as they grouped around the curious circular door that was set into a bulkhead.

The burn marks around the lock release pad where Telson had used his PD weapon to open the door were still evident. His hand went automatically to his holster and then he remembered that their sidearms had disappeared. But this time a PD weapon wasn't necessary: the door was ajar. He pushed it open and the lights came on automatically when he stepped into the room.

The room had been stripped bare. The sterile tanks were still in place but they were empty and corroded, nor were there any sign of the main trunking nerve ducts, the angels' equivalent of spinal cords, with their millions of micro optical fibres that had connected the computers to every part of the ship.

"We did warn you that the ship had been totally rebuilt," observed Angel One, speaking from a voice terminal in the corridor.

The four ignored the angel.

"Tidy!"

The android turned to face Telson. "What?"

"Where are Bran and Elka to be found at this time?"

"I'm not their keeper, you know. They're grown-up now." Seeing Telson's thunderous expression, the android added hastily: "All right. All right. I suppose I'll have to take you to them."

* * * *

Of the many alterations that had been made to the Challenger during her rebuilding, the most dramatic that the four had seen so far were the changes to the restaurant. Originally it had been large enough to seat the entire crew of the survey ship, but all that remained now of the several hundred comfortable tables and chairs were facilities for less than twenty. At least four fifths of the floor area had disappeared behind an ugly, unlined steel bulkhead. From the burn marks on the floor and ceiling adjoining the bulkhead, it was obvious that it had been welded into place by service androids without regard for the restaurant's once-tasteful decor.

"So where are they?" demanded Telson.

"Well I don't know," said Tidy indignantly. "All I know is that they're usually here at this time."

"For a meal?"

“What sort of idiotic question is that? Why else would they come here? To admire that bulkhead?”

“Are you looking for us, people?” said a bright voice.

The four wheeled round and stared at the two teenagers who were standing in the restaurant’s entrance. The girl was the taller of the two; she was dark-skinned, had humorous eyes and bore a striking resemblance to Astra.

It was Elka.

She was smiling but the youth was not. He regarded the four with a sullen, resentful expression, his hand resting arrogantly on a holstered PD weapon slung casually from his hip.

“Bran,” said Sharna faintly. The mental preparation that she had put into bracing herself for the inevitable meeting with her son was for naught; she opened her mouth in an attempt to speak again but the effort failed and, like the others, could only return the stares of the two beautiful young people.

Elka cheeks dimpled as she appraised Darv and Astra, her parents who were only ten years her senior, and then she smiled warmly. There was laughter in her voice when she spoke and her words came out in a rush:

“Hallo, people. Oh gosh, you must think it awfully rude of us, staring at you like that only we’ve got used to seeing you floating in the SA tanks with your skin all shrinkled and looking quite awful. Suddenly you’re real people.” She paused in mid-flow and gave a little frown in response to the four thunderstruck expressions confronting her. The flood of words resumed. “Oh dear. From your faces I can see that the angels haven’t kept their promise.”

Telson dragged his attention from the surely youth. “Promise?”

“To show you the holograms of us growing up. You haven’t seen them?”

Telson shook his head.

“They’ve both been a bit flaky lately. Not talking. Angel One said something about being preoccupied. We’ve been having some weirdness with some of the androids lately. It must be an awful shock for you — suddenly seeing us nearly grown-up.”

“That,” said Darv, speaking for the first time, “is an understatement, Elka. You are Elka I suppose?”

Elka’s infectious smile faded slightly. “I say, what do I call you? Darv or dad?”

“I think Darv will do.”

The smile returned and focussed on Astra. “Oh gosh, I can’t call you mother or anything like that, I mean, well — we’re virtually sisters, aren’t we?”

Even if Astra could have replied, she wasn’t given a chance because Elka bubbled on: “Gosh, I can’t believe you’re all awake at last after all those years.” The teenager turned her dazzling smile on Sharna and Telson for a moment before grasping the youth by the elbow and pushing him forward. “Come on, Bran, come and say hallo to your parents.”

There was no softening of the young man’s hard expression as he shook hands in a desultory fashion with Telson and Sharna. His hand returned to its position resting on the butt of his PD weapon. He carefully avoided meetings his parents’ gaze and said coldly: “I’m pleased that you have seen fit not to indulge in an emotional scene, Sharna and Telson. I take it that you have no objection to my calling you that? Good. We need a sensible working relationship between us.”

Sharna shook her head in wonder. “I’m trying to work out your ages but my mind—’

Elka gave a rippling laugh. “That’s easy, Sharna. I’m nineteen and Bran is a year younger.”

Darv draped an arm casually around Astra’s shoulder, a gesture that belied the turmoil of his thoughts. He grinned at Bran’s sour expression. “It’s going to be hard for us to accept,” he said, trying to force a cheerful note into his voice. “You being our children.”

Bran turned his sullen eyes on Darv. “Maybe. But what you will have to accept is that I am the commander of the Challenger now. You will eat. I will require Darv and Telson to report to me in precisely one hour’s time in the observatory.” Bran paused and nodded to Tidy. “Your android knows the way.” With that, the young man spun around and marched out of the restaurant.

For thirty minutes the four ate in near silence, not because of shock due to coming face to face with their two adult children but because it was impossible to stem Elka’s non-stop chatter. Whether her verbiage was from habit or nervousness was hard to determine. But whatever the reason, the four were grateful for the stream of conversation because it gave them time to think and force their minds to accept the bizarre situation they found themselves in.

“And your android, Tidy,” Elka bubbled on. “Really weirdness the way he visited you everyday while you were in suspended animation...”

“I was abandoned,” muttered Tidy, aggrieved. “Sixteen years!”

* * * *

“The artifact is now centred, Bran,” Angel One announced. “Range eighty-thousand miles.”

Bran spun on the swivel chair and studied the object displayed on the optical telescope’s main screen. He signalled to Darv and Telson to switch on the repeater screen on the console before them.

Since the two men had entered the observatory, Bran had insisted that the two men keep their distance, possibly because he was worried in case one of them tried to grab his PD weapon.

Darv operated the touch controls that caused the repeater screen to glow. He and Telson studied the circular dish-shaped object pictured on the screen against the background of the galaxy’s glow of light.

“What is it?” asked Darv.

Bran shrugged. “It’s origins are of no interest to me. What matters is that the gravimetric data says the artifact is metallic and that it possesses a mass of more than a billion tonnes, more than enough for what I have in mind.” He paused and regarded the two men. His eyes were wide and staring, exactly the same expression that Darv remembered from the days on Paradise. The difference was that in a three-year-old boy such an expression could be passed off as defiance, but in an adult could hint at madness. “One of my shuttles has been equipped with a modified PD cannon to serve as a cutter. Slicing the artifact into manageable pieces for sending to the Challenger will not pose too many problems for you.”

“What do the angels want with a billion tonnes of metal?” asked Telson.

Bran turned his icy stare on his father. “It’s what I want with it, Telson. The material will be used by the foundry androids to complete Phase Two of the Challenger’s rebuilding programme. Until Phase Two is complete, I cannot proceed with the Earthsearch mission.”

Darv gave a knowing half smile. “You mean that you can’t or the angels can’t?”

“My ambitions and the wishes of the guardian angels are one and the same.”

“So what exactly is this metal for?” asked Telson, studying the strange, dish-shaped artifact. “What are you going to build with it?”

“A specialist team of androids are at present under construction,” Bran replied. “Their task will be to armour the Challenger’s outer skin with a one inch thickness of micrometeoroid shielding.”

Darv and Telson gaped at the young man in astonishment.

“The entire skin?” said Darv incredulously.

“Naturally. There must be no weak points.”

“But that’s crazy! Have you any idea of the effect on the on the Challenger’s acceleration that such an increase in it’s mass will have?”

Bran smiled. “The ship’s mass was reduced by a billion tonnes during Phase One when the entire centre section that had been damaged in the Great Meteoroid Strike was removed. The work I am planning will restore it to its former mass.”

“But why bother?” Telson broke in. “We managed with the meteoroid annihilation shield, the anti-matter projectors.”

“But you didn’t manage, did you?” said Bran, regarding the two men in contempt. “You obstructed the angels; you caused extensive damage to the ship. And worst of all, you abandoned the search for Earth.”

“We found an Earth-type planet,” Telson muttered. “Paradise was good enough for us - and you when you were a child.”

“Good enough,” said Bran sarcastically. “You were in command of this ship which, with its hologram and video libraries, is the repository of all the accumulated knowledge of a civilization, four thousand years of written history. Books. Music. Replications of great works of art. The Challenger is a time-capsule containing the heritage of a mighty civilization... and you abandoned it.”

“The Challenger was built as a survey ship,” Telson retorted, his anger rising. “Its libraries were for the use of several generations of crew. Time capsule indeed.”

Bran moved off the swivel chair and stood facing the two men. Suddenly his eyes were alight, the fathomless expression was no more. “But that’s exactly what the ship has become, Telson. A sociological prediction model of Earth, that the angels have evolved for me, proves that the peoples of Earth are about to reach a crucial stage in their development. The angels say that they are ready to emerge from a third dark age that has lasted thousands of years. The last collapse of their civilization was brought about by a catastrophic war. The vast

store of knowledge in the Challenger's libraries is their rightful inheritance and destiny has made me its custodian. It is my duty to fulfill that destiny by leading the people of Earth to a new golden age of knowledge and understanding founded on logic."

"Well," said Telson ruefully. "If they've reinvented writing, you're certain to go down in their history books."

"Both of you will help me find Earth so that I may lead its peoples, my peoples, to a Third Epoch that will last a thousand millennium. I suggest you go to the quarters that Tidy has made ready for you and decide among yourselves whether you are with me or against me. I will be honest and admit that your help will be useful to me." Bran's expression hardened as he turned his gaze on Telson. "But if you are against me, the fact that you and Sharna are my parents will be of little interest to me when I come to decide your fate."

Darv broke the brief silence that followed. "Bran, listen. You said that Challenger is at the moment standing off from a star group in Sector Seven at a distance of one light year?"

Bran nodded.

"So why the hanging about? Why not go straight there?"

"The shield must be built first to protect the Challenger against the unusual density of meteoroids in Sector Seven."

"Whose idea was this lunatic shield?" pressed Telson. "Yours or the angels?"

Bran flushed angrily. "It's none of your business. I suggest—"

"Have you ever heard a strange pulsating noise?" Telson interrupted. "A sort of musical noise that disorients those androids with higher level intelligences?"

Bran hesitated before replying. "There has been a series of noises recently — yes. And there have been difficulties with some androids. But—"

"The noises are transmissions," said Telson firmly. "Attacks from an external source. We experienced them on Paradise. We didn't know who or what was generating them but we did discover that they had an adverse effect on androids, including Angel One and Two. It sounds to me as if this idea of a shield that they've cooked up is a desperate attempt on their part to protect themselves against the transmissions."

Bran gave a cold laugh. "Angel One did warn me that you would try and turn me against the angels. It goes to prove how unfitted you are to have any say in the running of the ship. Your android is waiting

outside for you?"

"Yes."

"He will show you to your quarters. You will remain there with Astra and Sharna and await my further orders concerning the artifact."

When Bran was alone once again in the observatory, he turned to one of the angels' voice terminals and said: "How was that?"

"Very good, Bran," Angel One's voice answered.

Bran smirked to himself and then frowned up at the terminal. "Why haven't I heard Angel Two's voice for so long?"

"Angel Two is using many of his facilities to co-ordinate the construction of the new androids for the foundry," was Angel One's bland reply.

* * * *

Darv lifted the inspection panel away from the wall and laid it on the floor of his and Astra's quarters. He studied the fibre optic tracks while the other three looked over his shoulder.

"Well done," congratulated Telson. "Tidy, you're to cut those tracks."

"It'll make them untidy," the android protested. Seeing Telson's expression darken, it added hastily. "All right. All right. No need to be threatening when I'm always so co-operative."

Tidy reached a manipulator into the wall opening and broke the tracks one by one by twisting them sharply.

"Now we can talk," said Sharna, looking relieved and giving Astra an encouraging smile.

"Not yet," said Darv, turning his attention to the floor covering.

"Why not?" asked Astra. "The angels can't hear us now."

"I don't think those are the real monitoring tracks," said Darv, pulling back the floor covering. "They were too easy to find. Help me."

After a careful search that involved rolling up the cabin's flooring covering, the real tracks were found under an obscure floor panel. With much complaining about the mess that had been made, Tidy deftly broke the tracks with his manipulator.

"Now we can start making plans," said Darv, grinning.

At first the guardian angels thought the loss of audio information from Darv's and Astra's quarters marked the beginning of another attack. They realised that a transmission was not the cause when they had identified those circuits which had failed. They correctly deduced that Darv was up to the same tricks that he used to indulge in before he and the others had abandoned the Challenger.

This time the angels were not unduly concerned because this time they had two humans on the ship who were under their influence.

"So what does chasing after the artifact involve?" asked Astra.

"Slicing it up into about a hundred chunks with a plasma cannon and sending each chunk back to the Challenger with the aid of portable thrusters," Telson replied. "It's supposed to be a fairly standard space mining technique."

Astra sat down on the bed and stared at the floor. "I don't think we should help the angels. Not after what they've done to us and our children."

"It gets us out of the ship for a while," Telson reasoned. "It'll give us a chance to plan what we're going to do next."

"I'm all for getting out of the Challenger," said Darv. "But as for helping that... That..."

Telson and Sharna looked sharply at Darv.

"Do you mean Bran," asked Telson dangerously.

"Yes."

"You were about to call him something?"

"Don't tempt me."

Telson relaxed and shook his head sadly. "It's not Bran's fault, Darv. He was brought up by the angels."

"So were we," said Darv sarcastically, "but we didn't turn into megalomaniacs. Oh come on, Telson, you heard what he said. All that crazy talk about a third epoch that would last a thousand millennium."

"Look," said Sharna practically. "Let's not have any recriminations. All that matters right now is what we're going to do. Do we or don't we

help Bran find Earth?"

"You mean - do we help the angels find Earth?" Darv corrected.

Telson looked at Sharna and nodded. "It'll give us time."

"Astra?" asked Sharna.

Astra nodded. "We help."

"Tidy!" Telson called out.

The android propelled himself out of the corner where he had been listening to every word of the conversation. "What? Not more work, surely?"

"Don't be cheeky or I'll kick something important. You're to stay in this room all the time we're away and you're not to let any service androids in to repair those optic tracks. Understood?"

"Don't worry," said the android tartly. "I'll need every minute in here while you're away just getting it tidy again."

* * * *

The shuttle was one of a new generation that had been built during the Challenger's refit. It had been copied by the construction androids from the original general purpose ten-man passenger ferries and therefore there was nothing revolutionary about its design apart from improved efficiency brought about by a reduction in mass. The excursion terminal where it was parked in a line with five other similar shuttles was new.

"Oh yes, I nearly forgot," said Elka brightly as she showed the four over the flightdeck. "There's a small six-seater ground car in the stowage bay, and there's a complete set of ten space mobility suits behind the ceiling panels. Think you can manage?"

"I think so," Telson replied.

"The controls aren't the same," said Sharna, examining the navigation console. "What sort of navigation computers are these?"

"Fixed position," said Elka, moving to Sharna's side. "They fix you a position along your route, you move to that position, and then you take another fix. Simple. Reliable."

"But inertial computers provide continuous positioning," Sharna pointed out.

Elka's cheeks dimpled. "And they have to be on continuously. Intermittent functioning computers are more reliable."

"Because they're non-organic?" queried Darv.

Elka chuckled and moved to the aft airlock. "Must get back to Bran. Depressurizing and opening the terminal airlock in five minutes. Good luck and all that, people."

* * * *

Twenty hours later Telson manoeuvred the shuttle into a slow spin above the centre of the dish that matched the artifact's tumble. To the four staring down through the shuttle's viewports, it seemed that the heavens were turning while the monstrous starlit dish maintained a fixed position. Telson jockeyed the shuttle closer. At a range of thirty miles, with the entire dish filling their field of vision, the four gaped in wonder at the fifty-mile diameter concave plateau. In the exact centre of the dish, at the lowest part of the shallow depression, a tapering, needle-like tower rose to a height of half a mile above the surface. Like the dish, the surface of circular cross-section tower was featureless.

"The pinnacle of the tower is in the dish's focal point," said Astra, referring to a radar screen. "But I can't see how that tower can either receive or radiate energy. There's no collectors or anything."

Sharna swept the dish with the optical telescope and reported that there was no sign of micrometeoroid scarring: the gleaming metallic plain was flawless in every respect. It was when she swung the telescope towards the distant rim that she noticed a slight aberration. Switching on the spectrum analysers revealed the astonishing fact that the artefact possessed a ten-mole thick atmosphere. "Pressure at the surface is half an atmosphere," said Sharna, checking the resources console. "Oxygen twenty per cent — nitrogen eighty per cent, and the surface temperature is just over twenty. We could move about on the surface without mobility suits. Gravity is also point five and therefore must be artificial." She caught Telson's eye. "The thing's obviously designed so that humans can exist on its surface."

"Or creatures with similar environmental needs to humans," Telson corrected.

"Nothing in the radio spectrum," said Astra. "The thing's dead."

Telson stared at the shining dish in silence. He realised that the construction of such a large dish in space would not pose insuperable engineering problems for a reasonably advanced technology. But the creation of a thin layer, high-density atmosphere to protect the dish against meteoroids was an idea of such elegant simplicity and yet one that would require the most advanced technology to put into practice.

“Do we land on it?” Darv asked hopefully.

“I don’t know yet,” Telson replied, adding grimly. “But I’ll tell you this much, Darv — we don’t destroy a thing like that until we find out exactly what its purpose was or is.”

“I’m getting some odd navigational readings on the position of the Challenger,” said Sharna. “She’s not where she ought to be.”

“Hardly surprising if you’re having to rely on Astra’s mathematics,” said Darv mischievously.

“There is nothing wrong with my calculations,” declared Astra, glaring at Darv. “They’ve always been proved accurate before.”

“By computers,” said Darv, grinning. “But this time we haven’t got computer facilities, have we?”

“It doesn’t matter if there is a slight discrepancy in the Challenger’s position,” said Telson testily. “We’ll never be far enough away from her to lose visual contact.”

“Telson,” said Sharna. “You’d better speak to Bran, his channel light’s been on for the past two hours.”

Telson touched the control that opened the radio channel. “Hallo, Bran.”

Bran’s voice, delayed by a fraction of a second owing to the 30,000 miles between the shuttle and the Challenger, was decidedly frosty in tone.

“Why have you not answered earlier, Telson?”

“Sorry, Bran. I must’ve closed the channel by accident.” Telson grinned with uncharacteristic impishness at his companions. “I’m not used to this console yet.”

“The controls are simple enough!”

“Well they may be simple to you, son. But out here we’re all sitting about completely bewildered.”

“You will send me TV pictures of the artifact as per your orders!”

“Just as soon as we’ve worked out how to operate the camera system.”

"You will send me those pictures now!" demanded Bran.

"Sorry, Bran, the time lag is making communications difficult. We'll call you back."

"It's only a third of a second, damn you!" Bran howled.

"Bye for now," said Telson, closing the channel. He looked at the others and muttered: "The boy's manners are appalling. Of course, I blame his parents."

The four laughed for the first time since they had come out of suspended animation

"Is it an Earth design do you suppose?" suggested Sharna, when they turned their attention back to the great dish.

"I'm damn certain it is," said Telson. "Okay, we'll land on it as close to that central needle as possible, but first we'll swing right round and make some holograms from every angle."

"Good idea," said Darv. "Maybe the operating instructions are written on the back?"

* * * *

Landing the shuttle proved unexpectedly easy despite the lack of a computer-controlled guidance system. Telson brought the shuttle down on a braking flight path through the dish's atmosphere and used the craft's vectored thrust facility to bring it to a hover at a height of 1000 feet above the metallic surface. He steered the shuttle around the featureless needle so that they could take a close look at it. After one circumnavigation, he reduced power. The spacecraft sank slowly towards the surface of the dish. The thickening column of the tapered needle slid upwards past the viewport windows. Even close to there was nothing to see, it was as if the tower had been machined from a solid block of metal and then polished to an exceptionally high degree. Telson increased power for the final braking and the shuttle settled on the dish within a few yards of the needle's base.

The four sat in silence for some seconds after Telson closed down the main engine. Through the viewports was the stunning spectacle of a shining plateau that curved gently up to a horizon twenty-five miles away. The starlight filtering through the strange artificial atmosphere imparted a curious blue tinge to the "sky" immediately overhead that hardened to indigo on the horizon.

Sharna checked her instruments and confirmed the earlier findings that it would be possible for them to leave the shuttle without wearing mobility suits.

“All right,” said Telson. “We’d better wear them to be on the safe side and leave the visors open.”

Ten minutes later, four mobility-suited figures, carrying lantern tubes to supplement the starlight, stepped down onto the steel plain.

Sharna knelt down and pressed a hardness indicator against the surface. The handheld instrument’s digital display registered a row of 9s — the maximum reading. She chuckled. “Bran can forget building his shield out of this thing. No plasma’s going to cut through this.”

They spent a few more minutes examining the dish’s surface, noting that it was pock-marked in places where the atmosphere had failed to burn up large meteoroids, before moving to the base of the tower. According to the hardness indicator it was made of the same material as the mighty dish.

Astra gazed up at the soaring pinnacle. There was a slight shifting in the position of the stars and she realised that the rotation of the dish would be causing the stars and galaxies to carousel around the tower as though it was the centre of the Universe. At the horizon, where the effect of the dish’s spin was at its maximum, it was even possible to observe a movement of the stars with the naked eye despite the lack of a fixed reference point.

“I need some more light over here,” Darv called.

Telson, Sharna and Astra moved to Darv’s side and held up their lanterns so that the light fell on the side of the tower.

“There,” said Darv triumphantly. “A seam.”

Telson peered closely at where Darv’s gauntleted finger was pointing. Visible on the surface of the tower was a faint, vertical line that was little more than a scratch but which was too straight to be accidental. Sharna moved her lantern very close to the mark so that she could examine it from an angle and, without warning, a door-sized section of the tower moved inwards and slid soundlessly to one side. Before they had a chance to recover from their surprise, a squat, angular android glided out of the doorway, forcing them to move quickly aside. The four gaped after the machine as it moved slowly across the steel plain. It extended a probe from the smooth fairing that covered its body and seemed to be examining the ground. It took no notice of the four people staring at it. They followed the android at what they considered a safe distance and stopped when it stopped. It found one

of the pock marks of interest. Two more probes appeared and extended down to the ground. The larger probe was in the form of a tube which the android aimed at the flawed surface. A beam of coherent light lanced from the tube and caused the skin of dish to glow and then melt.

"Looks like a photonic lance," Telson observed apprehensively. "Let's hope that it doesn't take a sudden dislike to us and use it on us."

The android cut the power to the photonic lance and brought another manipulator into play. There was a shrill whine as the machine carefully ground and polished the evidence of its repair work. It inspected its handiwork, seemed to be satisfied, and set off at high speed towards the horizon.

"There's no point in chasing after it," said Telson, seeing Darv about to break into a run. "Let's take a look at the doorway."

The door was still open when the group returned to the tower. Beyond the opening was a small compartment approximately six feet square, the sides of which appeared to be made of the same material as the tower. The difference was that the walls were glowing so that the compartment was brightly lit. The far wall bore a sign in the language that the four knew. It stated:

GRAVILIFT WILL NOT MOVE IF MAXIMUM LOAD IS EXCEEDED.

They stared at the phenomenon for some seconds.

Darv spoke: "Shall we see if the four of us exceed its maximum load?" Without waiting for a reply, he stepped into the compartment and turned to face his companions. For a fleeting second his expression suggested that perhaps he regretted his impulsiveness. And then the sign changed abruptly and began flashing the message: "Please do not obstruct the entrance if you do not wish to board the Gravilift."

There was a silence. Darv grinned. "I think it's friendly. Oh come on, if they don't like us they would have done something drastic by now."

Astra and Sharna followed Telson into the compartment and the door closed silently behind them.

"An elevator?" queried Telson.

"It has to be."

"It's not moving," Sharna pointed out.

"All right, so it's not moving. Maybe we've overloaded it?"

The door slid open again to show that the elevator had indeed moved because the scene revealed to the four was not the dish but a spacious

circular chamber. Arranged around the perimeter of the chamber were a series of work stations in the form of comfortable swivel chairs in front of control consoles. There were a number of exits between the consoles. Positioned near each exit were more of the repair androids, their photonic lance tubes pointing at the floor. Darv could not help thinking that their position was no accident, it was as if the machines were guarding the exits.

The floor and wall were covered with soft textiles in a pleasing selection of colours, and the ceiling was an unbroken surface of softly glowing green that provided the chamber's illumination.

"It would seem," said Darv, looking around with great interest as he stepped out of the elevator, "that we have hit upon the nerve centre of whatever this place is."

"That is correct, Darv," said a voice. "I am the control computer of Solaria D. Welcome."

It was a female voice. Warm and friendly.

Astra closed her eyes. "Please, no," she pleaded. "Not another guardian angel."

"My name is Solaria, Astra," said the voice. "Why do you not know me? You are of Earth for you all have passed every test."

Darv grinned at Astra's alarmed expression. "Don't worry, my lovely. I think I know what this place is. There's nothing to worry about."

"Do you have news of Earth for me, Telson?" asked Solaria. "I have spent so many years wondering how she is faring."

Telson turned slowly around, trying to locate the source of the gentle voice. "How do you know our names?" he demanded suspiciously.

"I heard you using them. I watched your journey from your mothership and I listened to your radio communications."

Solaria's honesty did nothing to ease Telson's hostile expression. "What is this place?"

"I believe Darv knows."

"It's an artificial sun," said Darv.

"Was an artificial sun, Darv," Solaria corrected. "Solaria D was one of sixteen artificial suns that were constructed in orbit around Earth to pour down life-giving energy on its surface during Earth's journey to a new and safe sun. The size of each dish, the spread of their beams, and their orbital height above the Earth were balanced so that the cycle of the seasons, of life and death itself, would remain undisturbed

during the great voyage.”

Telson’s suspicions were aroused. “You’re a freewill computer, Solaria?”

“Yes.” The single damning word was said without hesitation. As if sensing the impact of her reply, Solaria continued: “There was great opposition to the construction of freewill computers, but the task of maintaining all the systems of even one Solaria was beyond the capabilities of their crews... You must tell me about yourselves.”

“We were born in space on our mothership, Solaria,” Darv replied. “Our ancestors were born on Earth but we have never seen it. When our mothership returned to the Earth’s home solar system we discovered that the sun was unstable and that the Earth had vanished.”

“It is as I suspected,” murmured Solaria.

“Solaria...” began Sharna uncertainly. “Can you tell us where the Earth has gone?”

“I’m sorry, Sharna, but I cannot for I do not know. Although I am a freewill computer, many of my systems have been damaged over the years by strange transmissions that I cannot account for. All I know is that the Earth is near. Perhaps within forty light-years.”

“But you must be able to tell us where it is!” Astra protested. “We’ve been looking for it for so long!”

“I understand how you must feel, Astra, for I can see the anguish in your eyes.” Solaria paused, as if she was trying to arrive at a decision. “But because you are humans, I do not have the right to deny you access to the library. It contains all the holograms and entertainments that were provided for my crew. Also there are all the logs and voice records of Solaria D. Everyday that passes is recorded even though the tracks have been silent ever since the Earth abandoned me.”

As Solaria spoke, a ball of silent blue light materialised in the air in the centre of the chamber. The four watched in silence as the ball moved towards one of the exits.

“Follow the blue light,” Solaria instructed, “and it will lead you to the library. Don’t worry about the repair androids. They will not interfere.”

Telson yawned and made room on the hologram replicator worktop for yet another batch of recording disks that Sharna placed before him. He groaned. "How many?"

"About two-hundred."

Telson groaned again and fed the first disk into the replicator slot. It was yet another engineer's report, meaningless columns of performance figures, the results of thousands of hours of monitoring Solaria's countless control systems. The four had been going through the vast library for six hours and had found nothing of interest. Darv and Astra were working at another replicator at the opposite end of the library. Two repair androids were standing motionless on either side of the entrance to the library, their photonic lances pointing at the floor.

"Did you speak to Bran?" asked Telson, ejecting the hologram disk and inserting another.

"Yes. I told him that we were working on a method of cutting up the dish."

"Let me guess. He's a little mad at us?"

"Demented is a better word. I think the angels would like to send an android-piloted shuttle after us but daren't in case there's another attack."

Telson thought for a moment. "All right. If we don't find anything in six hours, we'll have to leave."

Astra and Darv approached. Astra was carrying one disk. Her expression was one of triumph. She laid it carefully in front of Telson.

"According to its index entry, it's a special broadcast made by Elkeran Six," she announced. "He was the President of Earth over a hundred thousand years ago."

"Careful with it, Telson," Darv warned. "It looks brittle."

Telson looked at the two-inch diameter disk with interest. If Astra was right, it was the oldest disk found so far. He ejected the disk the replicator was playing and carefully inserted Astra's disk. There was a faint hum as the replication field cleared. A picture appeared, the head and shoulders of a man facing the recorder. Age had obviously deteriorated the optical quality of the disk's surface because the image kept distorting and flicking from colour to monochrome. But the words the man spoke were clear enough:

"Goodday fellow citizens of Earth. The purpose of this broadcast is to end the speculation about the fate of Solaria D. As you know, of the

sixteen artificial suns orbiting the Earth, the erratic performance of Solaria D has been causing its engineering crew some concern. The last attempt to closedown its fusion reactor was a failure therefore it was necessary for me to order that Solaria D be expelled from its orbit.

“I regret to say that several of its crew were killed when the traction beams were released. When our forefathers planned the departure of Earth from its solar system, their calculations allowed for the loss of ten Solarias during the voyage. Solaria D is our first failure and we have a mere forty years to go. We are nearing the end of the Earth’s great journey and I am confident that we will experience no more difficulties during the remainder of our voyage to our new sun - Novita Six...”

The recording ended and the replicator ejected the hologram disk.

“Novita Six,” repeated Darv, gazing thoughtfully at the dissolving replication field. He stiffened suddenly. What he said next occurred to the others almost before he started the sentence: “Do you realise that all we’ve got to do now is find Novita Six on the starmaps here and we’ve found Earth!”

Part Five Sundeath

Telson ejected a hologram disk and added it to the stowage drawer of disks that he and Sharna had already examined. None of the few starmaps they had found made any mention of Novita Six. Darv and Astra had been gone thirty minutes on their exploring trip of the artificial sun — watched every inch of the way by Solaria and her repair androids no doubt. He glanced across at Sharna who was sitting at her machine, industriously ploughing through several drawers of disks. She glanced up and shook her head.

“Why are there so few star maps, Solaria?” asked Telson.

“There were enough for my crew’s purposes,” answered the computer. “All the Solaria artificial suns were in orbit around the Earth therefore there was no need for a Solaria crew to concern themselves with astro-navigation. Where the Earth went, so we went... Until I became unsafe and was abandoned.”

Sharna looked up. Unlike the voices of the guardian angels on the Challenger it was impossible to tell where Solaria’s voice was coming from. It was if she had the ability to make the air vibrate evenly throughout the artificial sun. “So you have no means of propulsion, Solaria?” she questioned.

“No, Sharna.” There was a pause. There was a slight edge to Solaria’s voice when she spoke again. “As I have been as helpful as possible, I will be grateful if you would answer some questions for me. Your ship is of post-Solaric Empire design?”

“Yes,” Telson replied guardedly, catching Sharna’s eye.

“That is most interesting, Telson. Does it have a computer control system like me?”

“It has two systems which I sincerely hope are not like you, Solaria. They are Angel One and Angel Two.”

“Ancillary Guardians of Environment and Life? That is even more interesting. Such systems are like me because they are freewill computers.”

Telson guessed what Sharna was thinking and decided not to give Solaria any more information. He was about to return to examining the hologram disks when Darv and Astra entered the library. Darv was

carrying a small instrument by its shoulder strap and Astra was holding a small carrying case. Their expressions were pale and drawn.

Sharna looked concerned. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," said Darv shortly. "Just a bit of a shock. Solaria will tell you about it I daresay. She's got quite a bit of explaining to do. The first thing we found was the communication room on the next level. All the radio equipment has been deliberately destroyed." He took the carrying case from Astra, opened it, and showed its contents to Telson and Sharna.

Darv grinned. "What do think?"

Telson took out one of the miniature hologram disks and examined it. It was unlabelled and looked in excellent condition.

"We found them in the calibration room together with this," said Darv, placing the instrument on Telson's working area. "It's a portable hologram that those disks can be played on, or could if its power supply was working."

"You will not be able to repair the portable replicator," stated Solaria. "And you will find its hologram disks of little interest. They were designed for engineers who wished to make memo recordings."

"In that case I'm not interested," said Telson, pushing the machine aside and feeding another disk into the full-size replicator. "What concerns us is discovering the whereabouts of Novita Six. Surely, Solaria, somewhere in your memory there are starmaps for this sector of the galaxy?"

"I'm sorry, Telson. Most of my facilities were assigned to routines to maintain the Solaria fusion reactor and to look after my crew. I've no idea where Novita Six is although I often heard the crew talking about it. I knew that it was the star that the people of Earth had selected as their new sun, and that is all."

"Does your ignorance extend to what Astra and I found in the calibration room just now, Solaria?" asked Darv mildly.

"Perhaps I should have warned you first," Solaria admitted. "Humans are so curious about everything."

"Warned about what?" demanded Telson.

"You better come and see for yourselves," was Darv's grim reply.

““Chief Engineer Halsten — commanding officer of Solaria D”,” said Sharna, reading the legend that had been etched into the block of clear plastics that encapsulated the remains of what was just identifiable as the remains of a human being.

“Sandrill Halsten,” explained Solaria.

“A man or a woman?” barked Telson.

“A man.”

Sharna straightened up and stared at the twenty other slender blocks of clear plastics that were clipped to the calibration room’s bulkhead, obscuring some of the instruments that had once monitored the performance of the artificial sun. Sealed and preserved within each block was a blackened, unrecognizable copse.

At the far end of calibration room, two armed service androids stood motionless guard outside the door that, according to Darv, led to Solaria’s central switching room.

“A dreadful accident,” said Solaria. “In a thousand years time my orbit around the star group will take me close enough to the nearest star to ensure a stable star-orbit burial for them.”

“What accident?” asked Darv, keeping a protective arm around Astra who was avoiding looking at the remains.

“It was after I became unsafe and was ejected from Earth orbit,” Solaria replied. “They were a skeleton crew who had insisted on remaining on board after the evacuation in the hope that I could be repaired. They were working out on the dish when the tower released a burst of solar radiation.”

“You said that you’re a freewill computer, Solaria?” queried Sharna.

“Yes.”

“Then why is it that you remained active after this artificial sun was ejected from Earth orbit? Your central memory must have taken millions of hours to build. Even with a technology as advanced as Earth’s, surely they would’ve wanted to keep you?”

“For what other purpose, Sharna?”

“Well... As a backup computer for the other Solarias. As it is you’re useless aren’t you, Solaria? A super intelligence looking after a derelict artifact — unable to communicate with even a space shuttle when it approached you.”

Solaria’s voice contained a hint of amusement when she replied. “You

are right, of course, Sharna. And in view of the assistance I have given you, I would liked to be linked up with the communication systems on your shuttle.”

“Why?” asked Telson suspiciously. “Who do you wish to contact?”

“Angel One and Angel Two,” said Solaria lightly.

* * * *

“Of course I understand the urgency of the situation, Bran,” said Telson testily. “It’s just that this artefact is made of a material that is going to be difficult to salvage. It’s very tough.”

“What sort of material?” Bran’s voice demanded.

“Sharna’s working on an analysis. Once we know more about it, we’ll know how to deal with it. Out.” Telson closed the channel and glowered at Sharna and Astra who were helping Darv connect up the portable hologram replicator to the shuttle’s power supply. “We’re going to have to teach that boy some manners,” he muttered. “How’s it going?”

“It’s working,” said Darv. “It’s a bit confined in here so I’ve set it to generate a very small replication field.”

“Play the unlabelled disk,” said Telson.

“Why?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Because it must be the last one.”

Darv selected the unmarked disk and fed it into the replicator’s slot. The space above the machine glowed and the sounds of a distant battle were heard: the blast and crash of plasma discharges; men screaming in pain. The head and shoulders of a uniformed man appeared. His fair hair was awry and he seemed to be crouching in a corner clutching a weapon that was out of sight. Pain had contorted his features.

“This is Chief Engineer Sandrill Halsten,” croaked the blond man. “Can you see and hear me, Mr President?”

“Go ahead,” said Elkeran. The president’s voice was terse, as if expecting grave news.

“I’m sorry, sir, but we’ve done everything we can.”

“You’ve got to stop her, Halsten! Smash her central switching room.

Do whatever you have to but, in the name of Earth, stop her!”

Solaria’s voice burst in. Not the gentle voice that the four had heard so far, but a demented voice; a voice crazed with the lust for power: “Total control, President Elkeran! Total control over the other solaria computers or I shrivel your largest city in two minutes!”

The sounds of the battle drew nearer. “This time she’s not bluffing,” Halsten panted. “We’ve wrecked all the communication equipment so that she can’t contact the other freewill computers, but she’s mobilized all the welding androids into two battle groups — one guarding the control room and the other one fighting us.”

A plasma flame bolt smashed into the bulkhead above Halsten’s head, showering him with sparks and setting fire to his uniform.

“We will have to switch off the traction beams and release her from Earth orbit,” Elkeran decided. “First we’ll send up a personnel ferry to evacuate you and your crew—”

“Cut her loose now!” Halsten snarled, ignoring the flames that were taking hold of his tunic. “What’s left of my crew will send Solaria D on a stardive course if we can get back into the control room — but you must release the beams now!”

The next flame bolt found its target. The four watched in horrified silence as they saw Halsten’s face dissolve like wax under the impact. The replication field went blank a second later.

At that moment an attack started. It was more powerful than all the other transmissions that the four had experienced so far. Within seconds the strange music rose to a shrill, nerve-grating whine.

Telson jumped to his feet. “Come on! Before it’s over! Sharna - see if you can get a direction-finding bearing on the source of the attack!”

* * * *

The two androids guarding the door to Solaria’s central switching room were paralysed by the attack and offered no resistance when Telson and Darv snatched away their welding tubes from their weakened manipulators and turned them on the door. The jets of plasma ate into the strange steel, turning its surface red, and then white.

“You cannot enter,” Solaria protested weakly. “It is forbidden... My androids... My androids...”

The door collapsed just as the energy charges in the rods were virtually exhausted. Telson was first through the door. Without hesitation, both men levelled their weapons at the organic intelligence that was floating in a clear-sided nutrient tank like a bloated jellyfish and opened fire. There was an anguished scream. For a second it seemed that the grotesque entity was trying to climb out of the tank. A severed nerve tendril fell from a bulkhead and thrashed dementedly on the floor for a few seconds. Darv directed the rapidly weakening stream of plasma from his weapon on the nerve. It blackened, coiled itself up like a spring, and then slowly relaxed. The two men stopped firing, their weapon capsules spent.

“There’s one more thing we have to do,” said Telson, surveying the mass of blackened, twitching nerve tissue that had once been an organic computer. “We’ve got to destroy the library. Bran and the guardian angels must never find out about Novita Six.”

Darv nodded in agreement. He turned to leave the central switching room and stared at the twenty preserved corpses of Solaria’s crew. “Actually, Telson, there’s two things we’ve got to do.”

The harsh whine of the transmission gradually diminished and reverted to the more usual reverberating music. Even that died away after a few seconds. The attack had lasted ten minutes. The longest so far and certainly the most intense.

* * * *

The portable thruster fired when Darv touched the control key. The lines connecting the string of twenty encapsulated corpses tightened and the bizarre procession moved away from the shuttle, heading towards the nearest star which, at a distance of one light year, was near enough for it to appear as a tiny glowing disk instead of the more usual point of light.

It was an hour since the shuttle had left Solaria D. Darv and Astra were wearing mobility suits and had worked for thirty minutes in the shuttle stowage bay, linking together the bodies of Solaria D’s crew. Both were breathing heavily from their exertions: although the twenty blocks of plastic had been weightless, they had still possessed mass.

They watched the line of corpses in silence for a few moments.

“I wonder if that star’s Novita Six,” said Astra over her mobility suit’s radio.

“It could be. It’s where Sharna thinks that the attack originated from.”
“Earth’s new sun...” said Astra wistfully. “If it is, they’re going home.”
“It’s a nice thought,” Darv replied.

* * * *

Angel One was the first to recover from the effects of the devastating attack. Regenerating all her primary foreground task levels took thirty minutes but the more intricate repairs to her thousands of damaged background task levels took three hours. Angel Two had suffered worse damage and there was a period of six hours during which he was forced to reassign several thousand monitoring tasks to Angel One while his wrecked levels were regenerated.

The most alarming aspect of this latest and most severe of all the attacks was that the delicate neural links between the two angels and their Android Surgeon-General Kraken in command of the main control room had been destroyed. The angels had no means of determining what damage had been caused to the giant android’s logic functions and, until the neural links between them and the main control room were renewed, they had no control over the Challenger’s photonic main drive and guidance systems.

* * * *

The shuttle was poised outside the Challenger excursion terminal, waiting for the doors to open, when Sharna said: “I’m sorry, Astra, but there must’ve been a mistake in navigational figures. The Challenger’s scoops are still furled so she obviously hasn’t used her photonic drive and yet she’s definitely not in the exact position that she ought to be in.”

“Well it hasn’t prevented us from finding our way back to her,” Telson observed. “How much longer do we have to wait until they open the doors?”

Darv chuckled. “What’s the betting that the last attack caused considerable damage to Angel One and Two?”

“I tell you there was nothing on Solaria D!” said Telson angrily. “Searching for clues as to the Earth’s whereabouts was the first thing we did.”

“Why should I believe you?” asked Bran sardonically. His face was pale and drawn and his eyes hard and resentful.

“You’ll see for yourself when the Challenger catches up with Solaria D,” said Telson. He glanced at Elka and Sharna who using the observatory’s main optical telescope and turned to face Bran again. “I presume that we are going after Solaria?”

“When I’ve decided,” said Bran coldly.

“Not on this course, we’re not,” said Sharna.

“I said — when I’ve decided,” Bran repeated, raising his voice.

“Please find Solaria for me, Sharna,” begged Elka. “I’m useless with the telescope and Angel Two’s being quirky again —he’s not answering when I call him.”

Bran gave Elka an angry look.

“So what’s wrong with our beloved angels?” asked Telson. He spoke casually — deliberately injecting a disinterested tone into his voice.

“What should be wrong with us, Telson?” inquired Angel One’s voice.

“You’ve still not explained why we had to wait fifteen minutes outside in the shuttle before you opened the excursion terminal doors,” said Telson pointedly.

“We do not have to explain anything to you, Telson. You are no longer the Challenger’s commander.”

“That’s Solaria,” said Sharna, making a fine adjustment to the telescope to sharpen the image of the artificial sun that had appeared on the repeater screens. She frowned and checked the telescope’s settings. “But it’s not in the position it ought to be in.”

“Well you can’t blame Astra’s calculations this time,” observed Telson.

“What are you talking about?” demanded Bran.

“Hold on,” said Sharna, touching out the controls that repositioned the huge telescope. “The graviscope’s showing an anomaly.”

The telescope’s servo-motors drove the telescope smoothly around a few degrees on its tracks until the objective lens was centred on the

new position that Sharna had loaded. She studied her monitor screen for a second and looked up the nearest angels' voice terminal.

"I take it that you Angel Two are maintaining a continuous surveillance of our immediate surroundings, Angel One?" she asked.

"It is for me to ask questions of the angels," said Bran angrily. "I'm the commander of the Challenger!"

"So you keep telling us," said Sharna wearily. "Okay then, Bran, you ask the question."

Telson looked questioningly at Sharna. "What's the matter?"

"I am about to transfer all my facilities to other functions," said Angel One. "There will shortly be a period in the observatory when I will be unable to respond to any questions."

Bran was momentarily stunned by the extraordinary announcement. It was a second before he regained his self-control. "Before you go, One. Has a full surveillance been maintained of the immediate space around the ship?"

"There would appear to be a gravitational anomaly beyond the Solaria artificial sun," Angel One admitted. "It is of no consequence. I must go now."

"Too damn right there's an anomaly," said Sharna fiercely. "No wonder poor Astra couldn't make her navigational figures work out." She switched on the repeater screens so that everyone could see what it was that she had discovered.

Telson stared at the screen. At first he could see nothing unusual. There were the usual myriads of stars covering the picture, with Solaria just visible on the edge of the screen. And then he realised that there was a patch of space in the exact centre of the screen where no stars were shining. He stared harder and his heart sank when he saw that the starless patch was circular in shape and that it had a faint halo of light. There was only one thing the phenomenon could be. He caught Sharna's eye and nodded.

"What is it?" asked Elka, who had also noticed the circle of darkness. "Why aren't there any stars there? Angel One — why aren't there any stars in the centre of the screen?"

There was no answer. Elka looked frightened.

"Because it's a black hole — possibly a collapsed dwarf star," said Sharna savagely. "Whatever it is, Solaria is accelerating towards it, and we're following Solaria."

Part Six Supermass

As much as Angel One disliked having to reveal the weakened state of herself and Angel Two, she felt that she had no choice. Abandoning the observatory was regrettable but could not be helped.

Angel Two had regenerated sufficient observatory levels to identify the source of the attacks as definitely originating from the nearby star group. The problem was that the hurried regeneration may have been faulty because the data he was obtaining showed that the gravitational anomaly was also a source of the attacks. It was data that did not make sense therefore it was decided between them that Angel Two should be closed down completely for a temporary period during regeneration while Angel One maintained what control she could over the ship.

Despite the urgency of re-establishing control over Kraken, it was important that some of the available levels were concentrated on monitoring Darv's behaviour. Angel One switched through all the undamaged monitoring facilities that could be spared and located Darv and Astra making their way to their quarters.

* * * *

"Hallo, Tidy," said Darv cheerfully as he and Astra entered their cabin. "We're back."

The android groaned. "Why is it that all humans appear to be programmed to state the obvious?"

Astra smiled. "Didn't you wonder what had happened to us?"

"I had hoped that you had all met with a fate that would have kept you away from my nice, tidy cabins. I suppose you want them back so that you can mess them up?"

"Did any service androids try to mend the damaged tracks while we were gone?" asked Darv.

"I had them trying to get in every day," the android complained. "But they always left when they saw me."

“And you stayed in here all the time?”

“Those were your orders. Although I often ask myself why I bother to obey them.” The android added on an accusing note: “But I was switched off again.”

“What happened?”

“You want to gloat I suppose?”

“I promise you that we don’t,” said Astra. “Just tell us what happened.”

“It was like all the other times only worse,” said Tidy disdainfully. “Froze up, I did. Froze right up. I was having an argument with one of the service units at the time when all of a sudden — zonk.”

“Zonk?” said Darv, trying hard to keep a straight face.

“Zonk,” Tidy affirmed. “It lasted longer than the last time, and it took me longer to recover afterwards. It’s a disgrace the way I’m treated. A disgrace.”

Darv pressed Tidy for more details. “Did the other android take a long time to recover?”

“Yes. I had to put up with it cluttering the place up for two hours. It made the place look dreadfully untidy, it did.”

Darv was lost in thought for a moment. He moved into the corridor and called out to Angel Two. After a delay, Angel One answered:

“Yes, Darv?”

“I called Angel Two.”

Another delay, then: “Two is extremely busy at the moment.”

Darv raised an eyebrow and winked at Astra who was watching him from the cabin. “Really, One? But there was a time when it was impossible to overload a guardian angel and there was no delay in your replies. What’s gone wrong for you both?”

Several seconds passed before Angel One answered. “It would be best if you both reported to the observatory,” Angel One answered.

It was on the way to the observatory, that Darv and Astra discovered that Angel One had ceased functioning.

“Being organic, I suppose they’re capable of self-repair?” queried Astra.

“Yes.”

Astra looked thoughtful. “Obviously they concentrated on repairs to

the monitoring levels around our quarters first.”

“What’s on your mind, my lovely?”

They stopped walking when Astra put her lips close to Darv’s ear. “What are our chances of regaining control of the ship?” she whispered.

Darv grinned. “You and I are beginning to think alike. The trouble is that Bran is definitely armed, so is our daughter for all we know, but we’re not.”

* * * *

Telson’s face was pale as he turned away from the telescope’s repeater screen and stared at Bran. “Do you have any idea what a black hole is?”

Bran returned his father’s stare, his eyes cold and expressionless. “A hypothetical region of space resulting from the gravitational collapse of a star following the exhaustion of its nuclear fuel. A supermass. So immense that sometimes not even light can escape its gravity.” He gave a ghost of a smile. “Educational androids can be more efficient than parents, Telson.”

Darv and Astra entered the observatory. Telson gestured to the repeater screen for their benefit and said to Bran: “You ought to take a close look as well.”

“I’ve observed the phenomenon before,” said Bran.

“At a range of one million miles?” said Telson angrily. “Take a close look at it, Bran, and then let’s have a hypothetical discussion about your monumental carelessness in letting the ship get so close to one.”

Bran looked bored. His hand dropped to his PD weapon. “All four of you will return to your quarters immediately.”

“For once you’re going to listen to me,” said Telson angrily. “I don’t care if you do fire because I find that thing out there a damn sight more frightening than any PD weapon. Obviously you know nothing about commanding this ship otherwise you would know that standard control room procedures require that the ship does not approach even a Class One black hole closer than one light-week. We’re a million miles from that black hole. What class is it, Sharna?”

“Class Five as near as I can judge.”

Telson nodded. "Tell him the clearance, Astra."

Astra tore her eyes away from the sinister circle of blackness in the centre of the main screen. "It's one light-week for every point on the scale," she answered. "If that thing is a Class Five, then the Challenger should not be navigated within five light-weeks of it."

"So," continued Telson. "I suggest that you and Elka go to the main control room now, reorientate the ship, and apply maximum photonic thrust."

Elka giggled.

"I'm glad you find it amusing," Telson commented acidly.

"Oh it's not that," said Elka brightly. "It's just that we—"

"Elka," Bran interrupted warningly.

"If that spooky blotch is dangerous, then maybe they ought to be told," said Elka, smiling inanely around at everyone.

"We should say nothing," said Bran coldly.

Elka's smile vanished. There was a sudden and uncharacteristic hard look in her eyes. She said quietly: "I will say whatever I wish to say, Bran."

Bran tensed. For a moment it looked as if his customary iciness was about to desert him. He was about to say something and then seemed to change his mind. He shrugged.

"You see, people," said Elka. "It's like this. We don't actually know where the main control room is."

The four stared disbelievingly at her.

"We've heard of it, of course. We knew that the angels had moved it or something when they rebuilt the ship, but they always said that we needn't bother about it. I mean - well - they look after everything, don't they?"

"Until now," observed Telson. He looked at Elka and Bran in turn. "Don't you have any idea at all where the main control room is?"

Their silence answered his question.

"That can only mean that it's under android control."

"Does it matter?" said Bran disinterestedly.

"It matters a lot," said Sharna. "The original builders of this ship designed the main control room for operation by a minimum of four people because they didn't trust freewill computers. Using surgical androids to man the control room was our idea, but only for short

periods, and certainly not for long periods with people on board. Surgical androids are good, but not that good." Sharna paused and nodded to the nearest voice terminal. "And right now it would seem that the angels are useless."

"Why?" asked Elka.

"Those noises are destroying them faster than they can recover," Telson replied. "That's the real reason why they want to increase the thickness of the Challenger's skin. It's their desperate hope that it'll protect them." He regarded Bran steadily and added: "All that talk about improving the meteoroid shielding is nonsense that only a child would swallow."

Bran ignored Telson and looked up at a voice terminal. "Angel One!" he called out.

There was no reply.

"Angel One! Angel Two! This is Bran. Will you answer please..."

Again silence. Bran called several more times but there was still no answer. It took a considerable amount of will power on his part to assume an unconcerned expression as he gazed for a few seconds at the black hole. Telson wasn't fooled.

"How much is that thing affecting us?" asked Bran.

"This is the observatory — these instruments are not navigation instruments like those in the main control room," said Sharna. "Without the angels' help, getting exact figures will be impossible, but I daresay Astra and I could work out some rough estimates. But if you want hard information for evasive action, then we'd better find the main control room and find it fast."

Another attack started just as she finished speaking.

* * * *

Stage by stage, Angel One was forced to abandon control over the Challenger in order to maintain her essential regeneration facilities and those belonging to Angel Two. Monitoring levels were closed down and most of the normal day-to-day background tasks such as the routine reprogramming of the service androids were suspended.

Repeated attempts to contact Android Surgeon-General Kraken commanding the main control room proved fruitless. The mighty

android had been designed to operate alone for long periods, but it was more than possible that the attacks had damaged his facilities for logical behaviour.

Darv swore when he rounded the corner of the corridor and saw the ugly steel bulkhead that blocked the passage.

"Another dead end down here," he called out to Telson and Bran as they joined him.

"Give me the radio collar," said Telson curtly to Bran. The youth opened his mouth to protest but Telson cut him short. "Don't argue, Bran! Give me the collar!"

Bran unclipped the collar from around his neck and handed it Telson without comment. The sudden loss of his mentors, the guardian angels, had undermined his self-confidence and arrogance to a certain extent.

"Anything, Astra?" said Telson into the radio collar.

"Nothing to report on our level," Astra replied. "There doesn't seem to be any undefined space that could accommodate the control room. Elka's checking the last corridor on our level now."

Darv knelt down in front of the bulkhead and ran his hands over the rough steel.

"We've had no luck either," said Telson. "Nothing but dead ends. Let me know before you move to another level. Out."

Bran held out his hand for the collar. For a moment Telson considered not returning it but decided that it would be best not to goad his son too far. Not just yet.

"Thank you, Telson," said Bran, snapping the radio collar back into place. "Tell me, what if we do find the control room?"

"Then we take control of the ship, of course."

"I control the ship, Telson. Let us be quiet clear on that point."

This was too much for Telson's short fuse. "Now you listen to me—"

"I think the sensible view is that we concentrate on finding the control room," Bran interrupted, raising his voice.

"I think we've found it," said Darv suddenly.

The two protagonists broke off and stared down at Darv who was still on his knees before the bulkhead.

“We’re pretty certain that this was the level that the old control room used to be on,” said Darv. “Supposing the angels didn’t move it but merely relocated all the surrounding approaches to it and sealed it off with these bulkheads? That would be much easier from the engineering point of view.” He gave Telson and Bran a broad grin and gestured at the bulkhead. “So if we were to try moving in a straight line instead of following the corridors...”

Telson broke the brief silence that followed. “Bran, give me your PD weapon.”

Bran laughed.

“All right then,” said Telson, pointing at the bulkhead. “You do it. Cut a hole through that and no arguments please.”

For a moment it looked as if Bran was about to lose his temper. His face went white and he turned to face Telson. At that moment Darv sprang and twisted both Bran’s arms behind his back. The momentum of his lunge slammed the youth against the side of the corridor. He gave a gasp of pain.

“Lesson one,” breathed Darv, holding Bran pinioned against the wall. “Never turn your back on the enemy.”

Telson yanked Bran’s PD weapon from its holster and levelled the weapon at his son. “Okay, Darv. Let him go.”

Bran glowered resentfully at both men. Telson lowered the PD weapon. He seemed uncertain what to do next. And then, to Darv’s amazement, he reversed the weapon and held it out to Bran.

“Burn a hole through that bulkhead please, son.”

Bran took the weapon without a murmur and pointed it at the bulkhead. He opened fire as soon as Darv and Telson had moved clear. He adjusted the angle of the streaming plasma jet to a narrow beam so that it sank rapidly into the steel. Flames, sparks and globules of white-hot metal spat from the channel cut by the weapon as he moved it slowly, describing a circle. No one spoke during the five minutes that it took Bran to cut a circle large enough for a man to crawl through. He stopped the burn as soon as the jet had reached its starting point. Darv placed his foot in the centre of the circle and pushed. The steel disc fell inwards with a resounding clang that echoed along the corridor.

Telson wriggled through the opening first. “Mind the edges, they’re hot,” he warned as Bran and Darv followed him.

“Well,” said Darv, taking stock of their new surroundings. “This looks familiar.”

“Why?” asked Bran, looking curiously along the corridor.

“Because this is the approach corridor to the main control room,” said Telson drily. “Good thinking, Darv.”

“It just goes to show how useful it can be to have a genius like me around.”

“The radio please, Bran,” requested Telson.

Bran handed over the radio collar without argument. “Now what?” he said uncertainly when Telson had notified Sharna and Elka of their find.

Telson smiled. “A breakthrough, Darv. Bran is asking for advice.”

Before Darv and Telson had a chance to react, Bran levelled his PD weapon and loosed off a blast between the two men. They wheeled round in time to see the bolt of plasma hit the small, black android that had that appeared at the far end of the corridor. The blast fired by the android went wide and hit the ceiling above where the trio were standing. They threw themselves flat just as another android appeared. It was clutching a PD weapon in its manipulator. It raised the weapon to the firing position when a second blast from Bran smashed into its tracks. The unbalanced machine veered into a bulkhead and then spun round on the spot until Bran finished it off with a well-placed shot in the chest that caused its total disintegration.

“Wouldn’t it be nice,” said Darv. “If for once , just for once, someone was pleased to see us.”

Bran jumped to his feet and, ignoring Telson’s and Darv’s warning shouts, went to investigate the two destroyed machines. He was turning over the wreckage when Telson and Darv joined him.

“You’re quite handy with a PD weapon, Bran,” Telson observed, keeping a wary eye on the end of the corridor where the aggressive little androids had first appeared.

“Just make sure you don’t forget it,” warned Bran. “Where have these come from? I’ve never seen androids like them before.”

Darv picked up the shattered remains of a manipulator. “Definitely made in the Challenger’s android production plant. I wonder why it took an immediate dislike to us?”

“With six PD manipulators? That’s all it is designed for,” Telson commented.

“Does it’s design philosophy remind you of anything, Telson?” inquired Darv.

“Fagor?”

“A miniature version of him.”

Bran frowned. “What are you two talking about?”

“An unpleasant android we once encountered before you were born,” answered Telson.

“So why should our beloved guardian angels fancy having a few little Fagors around?”

Six more of the warlike androids appeared at the far end of the corridor.

“You know what I think?” said Telson.

“That they’ve come to surrender to us?” asked Darv.

“That we should consider withdrawing in good order.”

“A triumphant retreat before an enemy advancing in utter disorder?”

“Something like that,” said Telson.

* * * *

“Fagors?” said Astra in surprise when everyone had reassembled in the observatory.

“Six of them,” Telson confirmed. “Plus the two that Bran got. He’s rather good with a PD weapon.”

“Who’s Fagor?” asked Elka. “He sounds fun.”

“You wouldn’t say that if you’d ever met him,” commented Astra. “So it looks like you got near to the control room?”

“Well it certainly looked like the old approach corridor,” said Telson. He looked pointedly at Bran. “It’s obvious why it’s so heavily guarded. The angels must’ve decided that humans should never be allowed near the main control room again. If we’re to regain control of it, then you’ll have to let us have our PD weapons back.”

Bran stared hard at Telson for a second and then gave a sardonic smile before shaking his head.

“It’s our only chance, damn you!”

“The angels will be back,” stated Bran. “They’ve never deserted us.” He added pointedly: “Which is more than can be said for our parents.”

“Telson,” Sharna called out from where she was sitting at the telescope’s control console. “Take a look at your repeater screen.”

“My repeater screen!” said Bran indignantly.

“Course deviation is now four eight one and increasing.”

Elka looked worriedly at the sinister black hole that was displayed on all the repeater screens. “I say, people. It does look a bit unfriendly.”

“There’s no such thing as a friendly black hole,” Telson observed caustically.

“There’s something very odd about it,” said Sharna, puzzled. “I’m no expert on black holes but the X-ray emissions from colliding particles in its vicinity are not as high as they should be. The gravitational readings say that its a Class Five and yet the X-ray readings say that it’s not even massive enough to be even considered a Class One.”

“But it’s still deflecting us from our course?” demanded Bran.

“No,” Sharna replied. “There is no deflection now. We’re heading straight for it.”

Bran’s self-possession seemed to desert him. He looked worried. “What will happen to us?”

Telson shrugged. “A cubic inch of black hole matter can possess a mass of several thousand tonnes or even a million tonnes. Your guess is as good as mine. But I daresay that whatever happens will be quick and painless.” He paused for a moment to let his words sink in. “So how about those PD weapons, Bran?”

* * * *

George regarded the gaping hole that had been cut for him in the bulkhead with considerable suspicion. “Now what?” grated from his crude speech synthesizer.

Darv paused before replying because he thought he felt a faint breeze on his face. Apart from the air convection currents that were encountered in the farm galleries and the water reservoir, draughts were unknown on the Challenger.

“Well?” George demanded.

“Through you go, George,” Darv instructed. “Then turn left, and then stop.”

The big agricultural android lurched through the opening and swung to the left on its broad tracks. It stopped, its bulk filling the corridor so that there was only a few inches clearance on both sides.

"Fine, George," complimented Darv. "You're next, Tidy. Wait behind George."

The little android turned to Telson who was holding up a wet thumb and looking puzzled. "Commander. This is an official complaint. I'm not designed for waging war. Wars are untidy. They make a mess everywhere."

"Which you can clear up afterwards," said Telson. He took a threatening step towards the android.

"All right. All right. No need to get aggressive," said the android hastily. It took the offered PD weapon from Bran and scuttled through the hole, taking up its position behind George. "Just so long as my official complaint has been registered."

"Why do you put up with that android?" asked Bran.

"It's a question I'm always asking myself," said Telson. "What's that noise?"

Bran tilted his head on one side and listened to faint, rushing sound. "I don't know," he admitted.

"I felt a draught just now," said Darv. "There it is again."

This time all three of the men felt the stirring of the atmosphere. The erratic draught suddenly became a steady breeze that whined along the corridor.

Telson fingered his radio collar. "Sharna. We're getting a breeze. Any idea what could be causing it?"

"Elka's just reported the same thing," Sharna replied. "It could be differential gravitational effects that the black hole's having on the atmosphere. We'll check it out."

"How are things in the observatory?"

"Astra's still checking the calculations. She says that you've got to get into the room in forty-five minutes at the latest otherwise the photonic drive's thrust won't be able to counter the pull of the black hole."

Telson swore. "But that's thirty minutes off her last estimate."

"Sorry, Telson. Good luck"

Telson glanced at Darv and Bran. "You heard that?"

They nodded.

Telson pulled his PD weapon from its holster. "So what are we waiting for?" He stepped through the hole and took up a crouching position behind George. Bran and Darv fell in beside him.

"Okay, George," said Telson. "Forward to the end of the corridor and turn right. Just keep going if androids start shooting at you."

"Humans stupid," grumbled the big machine as it lumbered forward. "Androids don't shoot at androids."

Two androids appeared at the far end of the corridor and immediately set about proving just how wrong George could be. The blasts from their PD weapons smashed into the agricultural unit's armoured track guards, showering clouds of sparks everywhere and producing a volley of complaints from George. Darv and Telson instinctively ducked but Bran and Tidy straightened up and returned the fire with uncanny accuracy. The two androids disintegrated.

"Mine!" said Tidy triumphantly.

"You got one and I got the other," Bran corrected.

"They were mine!" howled Tidy. "I don't mind you arguing with your father, but you would do well to remember that I brought you up, young man. I used to clear up all the disgusting messes you used to make and I—"

"Will the pair of you stop arguing!" Telson roared as another salvo of plasma discharge meteored into George.

Above the racket, Telson was uncomfortably aware that the sound of rushing air was noticeably louder and that the breeze was strengthening.

Darv opened fire on the five androids that had appeared. He disabled one and missed the others. At the speed they were moving, they would have overrun George had not Tidy, Bran and Telson opened up with a murderous barrage that completely obliterated the four remaining machines.

Darv spotted the damaged android struggling back on damaged tracks towards the far end of the corridor. "Now, Tidy!" he yelled. "Grab that one!"

Tidy used his manipulators to vault over George's bulk. He scooted along the corridor, grabbed the damaged android and wrenched off those of its manipulators that had been fitted with PD weapons. He dragged it backwards, clambered over George and dumped the mangled machine beside the others.

"Android Surgeon-General Kraken will destroy you for this!" it

protested as it clattered to the floor.

Darv yanked the machine upright so that it was standing on its wrecked tracks. "Who's Android Surgeon-General Kraken? Talk, little one, or I'll tear out your organics."

Like all high grade androids, the machine possessed a self-preservation instinct, therefore it talked: "Surgeon General Kraken is all-powerful."

"He's your commander?" demanded Telson.

"Of course."

"Where is he?"

"The mighty Android Surgeon-General Kraken is everywhere." the machine answered defiantly. "He is the commander of the main control room. Even now, he is planning your eventual destruction."

The android's last words were snatched away by the wind that had risen to a howl and was plucking dementedly at everyone's clothing.

"What the hell's happening?" yelled Darv.

George chose that moment to throw his followers into a state of near-panic by stopping and going into reverse. His tracks crunched over the captured android, effectively silencing its shrill barrage of protest.

"You crazy android!" Tidy yelled. "You nearly ran me over!"

"George! You're supposed to keep moving forward!" Telson shouted, imitating the backward hops of the others to prevent himself from being flattened under the big agricultural machine.

"Passage too narrow for George," the android announced, his voice barely audible above the hurricane-like howl of the wind. "Can't go any further. No good expecting miracles from androids."

"Then stop reversing, you brainless machine!" Bran screamed.

George stopped just as some more androids renewed the assault. Darv and Bran kept them busy while Telson contacted Sharna in the observatory.

"Sharna! What the hell's happening? It's blowing a gale down here!"

"There's been a mistake in our figures, Telson," Sharna cried despairingly. "Either that or its gravitational pull isn't consistent. We've no hope of escaping the black hole now at this acceleration rate'

Despite the enormity of Sharna's words, Telson hardly heard them because, as he stared along the corridor, it seemed that something was playing insidious tricks with his eyes: the corridor was becoming

shorter. The voices of his companions were suddenly distorted — not by the roar of the wind for it was as if their voices were becoming compressed, just as the corridor was. He vaguely heard someone shouting about their eyes but it was impossible to determine whose voice it was. The colours around him were changing — everything was turning red: the drab sides of corridor, the frightened faces of his companions who had stopped firing — even his own hands. He tried to speak but the only sound he could make was an unintelligible high-pitched squeal. There were more of the strange squeals that he realised were coming from Darv and Bran. The reddening became an opaque crimson fog that blanked out everything. The noise numbed his senses to the point where he no longer knew which way was up and which was down. His groping hands encountered something hard, it could have been George, or the walls, or the floor, there was no way of telling which. The noise was two screaming drills of blinding agony boring into his skull.

Suddenly there was a merciful silence and blackness.

* * * *

Telson had no way of telling how long he had been floating in the twilight world that straddled the threshold between unconsciousness and reality. For a while the sensations of wakefulness were stealing up on him and then retreating back into the darkness, and he observed them all with detached disinterest: the feel of something hard that his head was resting on; a dull ache in his joints; a cool draught of air playing on his face. He opened his eyes and experimented with focussing them on whatever was above his head. There was nothing above his head, no lights, no visual clues for his eyes and brain to latch on to. Just blackness.

Full consciousness came quite suddenly as if it had been waiting on the sidelines for an opportunity to strike with the full force of reason and perception.

He sat up and stared at the bodies laid out in a neat row in the semi-darkness. The row included himself. They were all there: Darv, Sharna, Astra, and Bran and Elka. Darv sat up, nursed his head, and groaned.

It was then that Telson noticed the dimly-lit scale model of the Challenger a little way off. It was a perfect model in every respect — even down to the fine detail on the heat dissipation fins around the

photonic drive outlet ports. As he stared at it, there was a slow dawning that he wasn't looking at a model — it was the Challenger. Nor was it close to but a some way off. The sight of the seven-mile long starship resting on what appeared to be complex system of massive cradles was so incredible, so impossible to grasp, that Telson's brain refused to accept the evidence of his eyes. A spiral staircase circled around one of the massive tubular uprights that formed part of the cradle system. The steps ended level with the open doors of the Challenger's excursion terminal. There were ant-like human figures on the steps and it was possible to discern a freight lift in the form of an apparently unsupported pallet moving up the outside of a tubular column.

He must have made a sound because Darv looked up and caught sight of the distant bulk of the Challenger.

"I don't believe it," said Darv weakly. "Someone tell me it's not true."

"It's true right enough," said Telson grimly. He stared around and realised that the Challenger wasn't alone. Scattered at regular intervals on the dark plain that stretched into infinity was every type of spacecraft imaginable and a few that it wasn't possible to imagine. Some were little more than twisted heaps of wreckage and others, the Challenger included, appeared to be intact. They ranged from craft with the same thrust transfer efficient cylindrical shape as the Challenger to those that resembled flattened dishes. There was even one in the far distance that looked as if it was bigger than the Challenger.

"I pass out plunging into a black hole and I come to in celestial junk yard," observed Sharna. "Someone tell me I'm not dreaming."

Astra was the next to regain consciousness followed by Elka and Bran.

Telson silenced the outburst of chatter by raising his hand. Everyone fell silent when they saw the approaching light. There were ten grey uniformed men standing on the strange railed platform that was heading towards them. There was no sound from the vehicle, not even the faint hum of a stabilizing gyroscope. The platform stopped within a few yards of the hypnotised group and the safety rail sank neatly into the vehicle's floor, enabling nine of the men to step down and surround the mystified new arrivals.

There was nothing particularly sinister about the men, they did not appear to be armed, but Astra found herself gripping Darv's arm with animal-like strength.

There was one man left on the platform. He was aged about 35 and was slightly taller than his companions. When he spoke, his voice was

soft and reassuring.

"I've been listening to you. I must congratulate you on your consummate skill with our language." Despite his gentle voice, the man's clear tones echoed around the vast interior. The words "our language" were whispered repetitively as they decayed away into silence.

"I'm sorry..." said Telson, groping for words as he recovered from the shock of the man's clearly modulated voice.

"Are you recovered?" the man inquired.

"Well... Yes."

The man smiled. "You must forgive me. My name is Theros. I am the chief engineer of the Spaceguard."

They stared at the man in silence. Telson eventually found the necessary words for a coherent sentence.

"Where are we, Theros? What is this place?"

Theros chuckled. "They always ask that. In their own tongues, of course - those that evolution has given tongues."

"Who?" asked Darv.

"Aliens, of course. In your case it is a pleasure to have visitors who have decided to master our language. We look upon them with great delight and, at the same time, with great caution. It is not an easy language."

"What is this place?" asked Telson, wondering if the whole thing was another of the angels' hallucinations.

"It is of a much more advanced technology than the technology that built your ship, my friends. Your ship must be one of the oldest that we have ever tractioned into the Spaceguard. We are the equivalent of the walls they used to build around cities on Earth to keep out enemies. We make certain that aliens passing through this sector towards Earth go no further."

"So this isn't a black hole?" queried Telson.

Theros chuckled again. "It looks like one, doesn't it? Try as they can to avoid us, no ship can ever escape. We traction them all in."

"Then we can continue on our way to Earth?" said Darv eagerly.

Theros shook his head in what seemed to be genuine sorrow. "Sadly, no."

"But we're descended from Earth people, Theros," Darv stressed.

“As we all are here,” Theros replied. He raised his eyes to the Challenger. “We have examined your records. Like you, we were not born on Earth but here on the Spaceguard. Our great calling is to devote our lives to the protection of the Earth; our great sacrifice is to do so without ever seeing it.”

“You must allow us to continue on our way to our home,” stated Telson.

“No.”

“You accept that we’re Earth descendants, Theros?”

“Yes. The problem is not you but your computers. There was a time when every ship was built with freewill computers like yours. Computers with remarkable abilities but whose automatic self-preservation systems degenerated into delusions of grandeur, desires to conquer and rule everything, including their makers. Some of those computers tried to launch major offensives against the Earth. That’s why this Spaceguard was built. There may be others. Our other task is stop the aliens, of course.”

Darv frowned. “What aliens?”

“Only the hostile ones. There are some who are peaceful. Only a few. The others we destroy.”

“You can destroy our computers with the greatest pleasure,” said Telson.

Bran looked as if he was about to say something. Theros gave the youth a searching look before answering Telson’s comment. “We shall. We had to take steps to prevent the Solaria computer forming an alliance with your computers. Solaria was a case of a freewill computer that was harmless because all her communication systems had been destroyed. She had been drifting in this sector ever since the Earth abandoned her. We saw little point in wasting energy disintegrating her but we were most concerned when we saw a shuttle from your ship land on her.”

“We destroyed Solaria,” said Darv simply.

Theros nodded. “Yes. My engineers reported that her central switching room seemed to be no longer active. That was clever of you, unless you entered the switching room during a period when the axon disabling beacon was operating.”

Telson looked interested. “So those transmissions that have been attacking our computers originate from here?”

“No. We merely amplify and focus the Earth’s transmissions into

specific sectors where we believe there is danger,” said Theros, looking hard at Bran again. “Your computers possess a remarkable resilience that has puzzled us, and which we are investigating now. It is possible that they have succeeded in imprinting their will on your subconsciousness and that they may have finally made the transition from organic computer to organic brain. It makes them formidable adversaries. If that is the case, you will have no right of appeal. I’m very sorry, but we will have to destroy not only your two computers — but all of you.”

Part Seven Deathship

The Spaceguard Council, under the chairmanship of Theros, held extraordinary meetings whenever a spacecraft was tractioned into the Spaceguard. In such cases, the only item on the agenda was deciding the fate of the spacecraft and its crew. Telson studied each of the nine impassive faces as they filed into the high-ceiling chamber and took their seats at a long table. Five of them were women. Telson guessed that they were all in their mid-thirties. Not one member of the council accorded the six captives even a cursory glance. Telson, in turn, ignored them by staring at the huge tapestry that served as a backdrop on the wall behind the table. It was pale blue, and of a plain design apart from a number of meaningless golden symbols that were distributed across the sweep of the tapestry in a seemingly random fashion.

Theros examined the statements that a clerk placed before him.

“Will Telson and Bran step forward please.”

Father and son did as they were requested.

“There is a conflict of evidence in these statements,” said Theros. He looked up at Bran. “Your father says that he is the Challenger’s commander, Bran.”

“I am the commander,” said Bran emphatically.

“Nevertheless, we would prefer to deal with your father alone in this matter. You may all withdraw with the exception of Telson.”

Bran looked as if was about to start an argument but he thought better of it when he felt Darv’s warning fingers close around his forearm in vice-like grip.

“Can we take a look round this place, Theros?” asked Darv cheerfully. “I’d like to look at some of the ships in the docking terminal.

“You have my permission.”

“Is there anywhere we can’t go?”

“You may go wherever your will takes you,” Theros replied enigmatically.

Darv stared at Theros for a moment and then shrugged. He accompanied the others out of the chamber. Telson scratched his neck

thoughtfully and used the gesture to switch on his radio collar.

Theros gave a wan smile. "The council has no objection to your companions hearing the proceedings, Telson, but we would have preferred you to have asked permission." He waved aside Telson's apology and cleared his throat. "We have examined the records in your ship, Telson. The council is satisfied that the six of you are descended from the people of Earth."

Telson's expression mirrored his relief. He took his eyes off the tapestry. "So we can be on our way?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"You are true humans therefore we have decided that we cannot destroy you as we would if you were aliens. Instead we have decided to allow you to remain with us and help us in our great calling here on the Spaceguard - guarding our beloved Earth against transgressors of her peace. If you love Earth, we are certain that you will be happy to share our glorious work with us. Is that not so?"

"We'd have to spend the rest of our lives here?"

"Yes." The answer was flat, unemotional.

Telson realised that the other eight members of the council were watching him keenly. He decided against giving a direct answer to the question. Instead he asked: "Why can't we be allowed to continue on our way to the Earth?"

Theros looked a little uncomfortable. "We have been unable to trace and destroy your two freewill computers, Telson. The years that you have spent in conflict with them has taught them to be cunning. They no longer use their central switching room. They have decentralized all their primary and secondary function levels and redistributed them throughout the ship. They have even placed a malignant force in the control room that we cannot identify."

"Android Surgeon-General Kraken," said Telson, his eyes straying back to the curious tapestry. "I know no more about him than you do. But destroy the angels and you destroy him, Theros. I assume that you can destroy the angels?"

"The axon disabling beacons will destroy them eventually," Theros replied. "But the truth is that your two guardian angels have integrated themselves into the very structure of the Challenger to the point where they are the Challenger. Of course, we have the ability to destroy the guardian angels separately. We would have to dismantle the ship - eliminate the angels step by step — and then reassemble the

ship. A huge task that will take us many years. Time is one thing that we can ill-afford. There are few of us because of the need to balance our population, and we must divert all our energies into watching for possible enemies of the Earth.” He paused for a moment and then said with an air of finality suggesting that further argument would be useless: “Destroying the entire ship is safe, certain, and speedy.”

* * * *

Astra stared around at the small control room of the alien ship that she had entered with Darv and Elka. There were three narrow seats arranged before three control consoles. Apart from the strange runes on the touch controls, the desks were not unlike those on the Challenger’s shuttles.

“Odd how an alien technology can think along similar lines when it comes to spacecraft design,” she observed.

Darv was dividing half his attention to the whispering voices from his radio collar. He nodded absently in response to Astra comment and studied one of the control desks.

“This is fantastic!” Elka enthused. “Bran and Sharna are crazy not to want to come with us.” She dropped her slim body into one of the seats. “Hey look, people. They were even about the same size as us.”

“There’s nothing here that looks like armament control,” said Darv bitterly. “You’re right, Astra. An unarmed freighter just tractioned in and left to rot.” He gazed out through a viewport at the other wrecked ships scattered across the vast, echoing docking terminal. In the distance was the huge bulk of the Challenger resting on its cradles. “Just like the rest of the ships in this hellish place.”

“Will they wreck the Challenger?” asked Elka, suddenly serious.

“It sounds like it,” said Darv.

Astra gave a sudden scream. For a moment Darv thought that she was in danger, but she was pointing at the far corner of the control room. Elka’s reaction when she saw what Astra had seen was the opposite: she gave a squeal of delight, jumped up from her seat, and knelt down beside the strange, elongated skeleton of the alien.

“Elka — don’t touch,” warned Astra, trying to keep her voice steady.

Elka took no notice. She stared at the remains in morbid fascination and prodded at the remnants of clothing that were clinging to the

bones.

“Leave it alone,” said Darv half-heartedly, knowing full well that had Astra not been present, he would’ve been down on his knees beside Elka examining the remains with her.

The only item of the alien’s clothing that had not rotted away was a close-fitting dome-shaped helmet made of a reflective metallic material that Darv couldn’t identify. Elka carefully removed the helmet and shook it. A thin rain of dust sank slowly to the floor of the control room. Elka blew into the helmet and unleashed another cloud of dust. Astra shuddered and looked away.

Elka settled the gleaming helmet on her head and grinned at her parents. “How do I look?”

“Terrible,” said Darv, pulling her to her feet.

“Let’s do some more exploring,” said Elka enthusiastically. “Some real exploring. Telson’s bound to be ages with that dreary council thing. Please, Darv.”

Darv exchanged a brief look with Astra. That Elka now seemed to be accepting the authority of her parents had not escaped their notice. He listened to the voices whispering from the radio collar. Theros was delivering a long dissertation on the duties of Spaceguard engineers.

“Very well,” said Darv, taking Astra’s hand. “Let’s see if we can find out what Theros meant when he said that we could go wherever our will took us.”

* * * *

With Angel Two closed down, Angel One was busy regenerating the necessary levels that would enable her to contact Android Surgeon-General Kraken in the main control room. She was well aware that the Challenger was trapped in an environment that she did not fully understand. Also, she had sensed the presence of mapping probes that had entered her nervous system. She quickly discovered that the probes were the product of an advanced intelligence and yet she had little difficulty isolating them harmlessly in some of her subroutine levels that had not been used since the Great Meteoroid Strike. There was no time for self-congratulation; the most pressing need was to re-establish command over Kraken so that the advanced observation facilities of the main control room would be available to her in order

to learn more about the strange artificial black hole that had captured the Challenger.

It took ten hours of painstaking work by three specialized service androids before a primitive circuit could be opened that connected Angel One to Kraken. His failure to answer the preliminary check calls confirmed her suspicions that the attacks had caused extensive damage to the giant android's higher level logic functions.

* * * *

After picking their way out of the wreckage of the alien freighter, Darv, Elka and Astra entered a long, straight, well-lit passageway that led off from the main docking terminal. Elka kept running ahead, proudly wearing her new headdress, and peering curiously into rooms whose polarizing light thresholds opened out onto the corridor. They all looked into one of the rooms and saw a neat but austere apartment that appeared to be designed to accommodate one person.

"It's strange how there doesn't seem to be anyone around," Astra observed as they continued along the corridor.

"Maybe those councillors are the only people?" Darv suggested. "Elka. Must you wear that crazy helmet?"

"Oh but it's fun," Elka protested, and skipped ahead to where the corridor turned sharply at a right angle. She disappeared from sight.

Darv and Astra reached the turning and saw Elka a long way ahead. They stopped. Darv was suddenly struck by an irrational but very powerful fear that it would be dangerous to proceed any further.

"No, Elka! Come back!" Darv shouted anxiously.

Elka turned round and waved. "Come on! There's lots to see!"

"You wait for us, young lady."

Astra laughed.

"What's the joke?" Darv demanded.

"You. You're getting old, Darv. There was a time when you were as crazy and as headstrong as Elka."

"Do you want to go down there?"

"No."

“Well nor do I,” said Darv firmly. “I’ve got a feeling about going any further.”

Astra looked thoughtful. “I wonder why?”

“Because I don’t think it’s safe.”

“What I meant was, I wonder why the two of us feel the same way?”

Darv was listening to the collar radio. His face became serious. “The council meeting’s about to adjourn.”

“What’s happening?”

Darv increased the volume so that Astra could hear the closing words of Theros’ summing up. Her face became as tense as Darv’s expression.

“So it looks like we’re going to be stuck here?” she said despondently.

“Unless they change their minds tomorrow. Which doesn’t seem likely.”

Elka retraced her footsteps to her parents. “Hey, people. Why the long faces? Aren’t you coming? There’s some sort of control room at the far end... Hey! You’re not scared, are you?”

“Scared?” said Darv loftily. “Of course we’re not scared. It’s just that Astra and I are sensitive about our company. We refuse to go anywhere with someone who insists on wearing such a lunatic hat.”

Elka laughed and removed the helmet. “There. Better?” Suddenly her expression changed; the laughter was gone — her face went white with fear and she clung to Darv’s arm with hands that were trembling with great violence. “Oh please, Darv. Let’s go back to the Challenger.”

The suddenness of Elka’s transformation from laughter to terror baffled Darv and Astra.

“What’s the matter?” said Darv in concern.

And then Elka was screaming and tugging at Darv’s arm. “Please get me away from here. Please! Please!”

When later recalling the events that took place in that strange passageway, a question that Darv would frequently put to himself, without ever obtaining a satisfactory answer, was to wonder what curious intuitive force it was that prompted him to recover the helmet that Elka had dropped and put it on her head. Once the helmet was in place, the change in Elka was as remarkable as the speed at which it took place. She gave an abrupt laugh and relaxed.

“Hey, that was weirdness, people. I’m fine now. I don’t know what happened to me.” She gave Astra and Darv a quick, bright smile in

turn. “What are we waiting for? Let’s get down the corridor.”

“No,” said Darv firmly, taking Elka by the arm and leading her back towards the docking terminal. “This way, young lady.”

Darv and Astra ignored Elka’s protests. They walked for two minutes and stopped when Darv said: “All right, Elka. Now give me the helmet please.”

Puzzled, Elka took off the helmet and gave it to Darv who pulled it on.

“Why, Darv?” asked Astra.

“Because when Theros said that we could go anywhere that our will took us, he meant just that because the sensitive areas of this place are guarded by auto-suggestion barriers that this helmet can screen the wearer against. I’m just going to reconnoitre. I’ll be back in thirty minutes. I want you both to return to Bran and Sharna in the Challenger. Telson will be back there soon. Tell him that he’s not to leave the Challenger to come looking for me. That goes for all of you’

“But—’ began Astra.

“Just do as I say! I won’t be gone longer than half an hour.”

Darv was gone, heading towards the right angle turn in the corridor before Astra had a chance to offer further objections.

He rounded the bend and jogged along the passageway, his senses fully alert for the unusual. He came to an open doorway at the far end of the corridor. After only a moment’s hesitation, he crossed the threshold and stood surveying the control room. He moved to the nearest bulkhead-mounted control panel and studied the various digital displays. The designation labels beneath each row of digits were in his language but their meanings were obscure: NEGATIVE GRAVITY SAFETY INTERLOCKS... NEGATIVE GRAVITY INTERLOCK OVERRIDE... TRACTION BEAM DIRECTIONAL STABILITY... TRACTION BOOST —POSITIVE... TRACTION BOOST — NEGATIVE. He moved to a large, illuminated logic diagram which showed the routings of the various controls. After five minutes intensive concentration, the cryptic legends began to make awesome sense.

* * * *

“Describe the room,” Telson fired at Elka.

“Well I don’t know,” said Elka defensively. “I didn’t get a good look at

it.”

“But it was definitely a control room of some sort? You’re sure of that?”

“Oh yes,” Elka agreed, nodding emphatically. “There were all sorts of instruments and digital displays.”

“I should be asking these questions,” stated Bran petulantly.

Telson looked contemptuously at his son. “Why?”

“Because I’m the commander of this spacecraft.”

“Right now no-one’s the commander of anything,” said Telson. “If you want responsibility, then go after Darv.”

“No,” said Sharna. “He’s got another fifteen minutes.”

“But that crazy hothead—”

“Only takes calculated risks,” said Sharna, finishing Telson’s sentence. “We’ll give him five minutes and then we’ll send Tidy after him.”

“Oh thanks,” said Tidy, who was hovering outside the observatory, eavesdropping as usual. “Thanks very much.”

* * * *

Darv ran across the black floor of the docking terminal, weaving around the debris of wrecked spacecraft as he made his way towards the Challenger’s massive bulk. He had been sprinting for ten minutes and was badly winded.

He was within a mile of the boarding steps that spiralled around one of the huge uprights of the system of cradles that supported the spacecraft when he spotted Tidy. The diminutive android was scooting across the artificial plain as if a creature that he particularly objected to was after him. A PD weapon was clutched in a manipulator.

“Tidy!”

The android veered off course and whirled to a standstill in front of Darv. “I’m supposed to be looking for you,” he said accusingly.

“Well,” Darv gasped, fighting to get his breath back, “you’ve found me. I can’t run another yard so you’ll have to carry me.”

“What!” said Tidy, clearly aghast. “I can’t carry you — you’re twice my weight.”

“And you’re twice my strength and speed. If we’re not back on the Challenger in ten minutes, I think that something very nasty’s going to happen to the pair of us.” Without further argument, Darv swung his leg over Tidy’s trunk and hoisted his feet off the ground.

“This is a disgrace,” grumbled the android, bracing himself and moving sluggishly in the direction of the Challenger. “I’m not designed for carrying people.”

“Nor were you designed to be blown apart.”

“Is that what’s going to happen?”

“It’s a possibility,” Darv admitted.

Tidy’s acceleration was remarkable considering the bulk of his unwelcome burden.

* * * *

“From what I could make out of the diagrams,” said Darv, “the traction beam generators are beneath the floor of this docking terminal.”

“Hang on,” said Sharna. “If the beams created an artificial gravity field that hauled us in here, what will happen when they go into reverse? Surely the Challenger will smash into the roof of this terminal?”

“There isn’t a roof,” Darv replied. “The reason we can’t see the stars is simply because there’s a light polarizing dome covering the entire terminal.”

Telson raised an eyebrow. “Then how come the docking terminal is pressurized?”

“In the same way that the artificial atmosphere was retained on Solaria I suppose — by gravity.”

There was a brief silence in the observatory. Bran was looking resentful over the initiatives that everyone seemed to be seizing without reference to him.

“Two minutes,” muttered Telson. He gave Darv a searching look. “Supposing someone goes into the control room and sees the altered settings?”

Darv shrugged. “In that case they’ll switch off the timers and zero the

settings, and we'll be stuck here for good."

Sharna frowned at Darv. "How long does the reversed gravity field take to build up?"

"I've no idea," Darv admitted. "All I know is that I overrode the safety interlocks and set every control in sight to their maximum values."

"Does it matter?" inquired Telson.

Sharna smiled. "I was just thinking that gravity working in reverse could result as an explosion if it operates fast enough."

The tremor that shook the Challenger was followed by a series of distant, reverberating crashes.

Sharna manually switched in the optical systems that displayed pictures of the spacecraft's surroundings on the various repeater screens. One picture showed the Challenger's vast girth separating from the cradles. The massive tubular columns were breaking free, some were rising with the spacecraft, others were beginning to describe slow circles that sent them crashing into other columns. As the six stared in amazement at the screen, they all saw that the floor of the docking terminal was receding — slowly at first and then with a steadily increasing velocity. The entire spacecraft gave a tremendous lurch that was beyond the ability of the compensators to even out. The shockwave sent them staggering. Loose items fell to the floor.

"My God," breathed Telson. "We're back in space."

It was true. All the repeater screens showed billion pinpricks of light of the firmament. Also on the screen were the crazily pirouetting shapes of derelict spacecraft which, like the Challenger, were being hurled out of the Spaceguard with a force equal to that which they had been drawn in.

On one screen, Telson located the strange disc-like shape of what he presumed was the Spaceguard. He didn't know the size of the artificial black hole therefore it was impossible to tell at any given moment how far they were away from it, but what was obvious was that it was receding at a phenomenal velocity. He was about to try and pick out surface details when the screen suddenly turned to a blinding white light that illuminated the entire interior of the observatory. As the distance increased, so the image on the screen turned from a featureless whiteout to an expanding, glowing ball that resembled a miniature nova.

After two minutes the light had shrunk to yet one more point of light against the background of the galaxy's millions of stars.

"Darv," said Telson quietly.

“Yes?”

“Well done.”

Darv nodded and said nothing. He turned his attention back to the screen but it was no longer possible to pick out what had once been the mighty Spaceguard. Darv’s expression was not one of pride in his achievement.

* * * *

Angel One was concerned. Although Angel Two was operational again, albeit with several higher function levels working at restricted efficiency until regeneration was complete, several of the optical fibre tracks that controlled some of the Challenger’s automatic systems had been severely damaged during the forcible separation from the Spaceguard.

A service android team responsible to Angel Two were sent out onto the outer hull to assess the damage. They reported back that a mass of debris from the Spaceguard’s docking terminal had smashed through the skin and had wrecked an optical fibre trunking.

At first the effect of the damage was not obvious - all the Challenger’s complex systems appeared to be in working order. Fifty hours later, when Angel One and Angel Two were operating at vastly improved efficiency — although still far short of maximum efficiency, they carried out a series of combined tests that quickly established the true magnitude of the disaster: all food, oxygen, and purified water production necessary to sustain a human crew on the Challenger had ceased.

* * * *

Astra was sitting up on the bed with her arms hooked around her knees while listening to Darv singing as he turned under the dryers after having taken a shower.

“I spent an hour in the observatory with Sharna today,” she announced.

“And?”

“She said that Telson’s happy with the course we’ve been on since the Spaceguard explosion.”

Darv entered the room. “You know, I don’t feel any cleaner. Either it’s my imagination or is the water a greyish colour?”

“It’s been a month since the explosion,” Astra continued. “You’d think he’d be worried about the fact that we’ve not gained control of the main control room.”

“He’s biding his time.”

Astra grimaced. “I’ve still got that headache. Fetch me another neuralquell please, Darv.”

Darv crossed to the cabin’s sink unit, obtained a cup and a tiny capsule from the multi-dispenser, and filled the cup with water. He crossed to the bed and handed both items to Astra. She swallowed the capsule, sipped the water, and grimaced again.

“What’s the matter?”

“Taste it.”

Darv took a sip and pulled a face. “Tastes like some contamination in our supply pipe. I’ll get Tidy to clean it out tomorrow.”

“That’s right,” muttered Tidy from his favourite sulking corner. “Make me do jobs I’m not designed for.”

* * * *

“Look at that,” said Elka in disgust. “I always eat twice that for breakfast. It’s been getting less and less everyday. Tidy! Come here.”

The android trundled across the restaurant to the table where the six were eating breakfast. “What’s the matter?”

“Tidy, be a wondrous angel and take this back for me. Tell the galley androids that I want my usual amount.”

Tidy regarded her in contempt. “You’ve got legs, haven’t you?”

“Tidy!” Sharna snapped irritably. “Do as you’re told!”

The android went off with Elka’s plate, muttering something about not being designed to carry plates and that no one was to expect him to clear up the mess if he dropped it.

Astra smiled. “You were always ravenous when you were a baby, Elka.

The hours I spent feeding you.”

“I’m certain that we’re all getting less food than usual,” Darv declared. “I seem to feel hungry all the time lately.”

“A fault with the galley androids,” Bran observed. “The angels will find out what’s wrong and put it right.”

Telson chuckled. “I wish I had your simple faith, son.”

Bran gazed coldly at his father. “I have said this repeatedly: I would prefer it if you addressed me as commander.”

* * * *

Darv and Astra surveyed the farm gallery in disbelief. All around them was the evidence that the Challenger’s vital food production centre was slowly dying. The crops were wilting and turning pale owing to lack of light; the leaves on the neat rows fruit trees were mottled and turning brown; and the once dark soil was yellow with dryness.

“No wonder Angel One was reluctant to give us directions on the new route here,” said Astra bitterly. “Just look at it.”

Darv knelt down and trickled a handful of parched soil through his fingers. “How long has it been like this, George?”

“Four weeks,” grated the agricultural android. “No rain and not enough light for five weeks. Can’t grow crops without water and light. No good expecting miracles from androids.”

Darv looked up at the overhead clusters of xenon lights. It was midday, the time of day when the heat and light from the lamps that simulated solar energy ought to be at maximum intensity. Instead they were giving off a dull, reddish light that it was possible to look at without squinting.

“Are the other farm galleries like this, George?” asked Darv.

“Now only this one. All other galleries closed down during rebuilding.”

Darv nodded. It was an answer he had expected. The original farm galleries had been required to provide enough food to support a crew of several hundred.

“So there are no food reserves either?” Astra queried.

George jabbed a manipulator at the field of dying crops. “Those are

the reserves. Food production stopped. Oxygen production stopped.”

Darv looked puzzled and then he remembered that all the Challenger’s oxygen was produced by the plant life in the farm galleries.

* * * *

The water reservoir had been one of Darv’s and Astra’s favourite playgrounds when they were children. They had spent countless happy hours splashing in its clear, tepid water and afterwards drying themselves under the powerful solar lights. It was the lights that evaporated the water, turning into a fine mist for use as rain in the farm galleries. Now the water was cold, stagnant, and uninvitingly turbid. Like the solar lights in the farm gallery, the clusters of lamps suspended over the dank water were giving off a cold, reddish light at about a quarter of their normal midday intensity.

“It’s as if the Challenger’s dying,” said Astra softly.

* * * *

“Atmospheric oxygen content is down three points below normal and the carbon dioxide level is up,” Sharna announced. She had used some environmental test equipment taken from a shuttle for her analysis of the Challenger’s atmosphere.

Bran looked contemptuous. “Does it matter? There’s only six of us consuming oxygen and the volume of the Challenger is—”

“What about all the thousands of higher function androids with organic intelligences?” Telson pointed out. “They use oxygen. Some of them twenty times as much oxygen as we do.”

* * * *

The guardian angels were not happy about the decision that they came to but they decided that they had no choice. They broke the news to Bran when he was in his cabin with Elka.

“But I’m the commander of the Challenger, Angel One!” he protested. “I’m the one you have chosen to rule the Earth! Telson and the others abandoned the Earthsearch mission to settle on Paradise. This is my ship.”

Elka looked up from the book she was reading. “Listen to what Angel One has to say, Bran.”

“But—’

Elka grasped Bran’s chin and jerked his head round to face her. “Listen to what Angel One has to say,” she repeated quietly.

Bran stared into her eyes. There was no sign of their normal vivacious sparkle. They were hard and unsmiling. His will weakened. He nodded.

“Of course this is your ship, Bran,” Angel One continued. “And you will rule the Earth. This is only a temporary measure. We promise you that you will have command again as soon as the emergency is over.”

* * * *

“Sorry, One,” said Telson curtly. “Not interested. You made my son commander.”

“You ought to think about it,” said Sharna reprovingly.

“I just did. I’m not interested.”

“No one can think straight in this stale atmosphere,” said Darv.

“Bran does not have your experience—’ began Angel One.

“He doesn’t have any experience.” Telson paused and chuckled. “And he doesn’t know where Earth is.”

The other three looked at Telson in surprise.

“You mean that you do know?” inquired Angel One.

“Oh yes. I discovered its whereabouts on the Spaceguard. There was a tapestry hanging in the council chamber which I later realised was a starmap.”

“Do all four of you still wish to find Earth?” asked Angel One.

“Of course we do,” Astra declared, her eyes shining. “It’s what we’ve always wanted. And now that Telson knows where it is...”

There were agreeing comments from Darv and Sharna.

“Our ambitions match, Telson,” Angel One remarked.

Telson considered his answer. “If I assume command, One, it will be on my terms.”

“Which are?”

“First you tell me where the rest of the PD weapons are hidden and you supply diagrams of the new corridor layout around the approaches to the main control room.”

“Agreed.”

“You provide normal assistance in the main control room and you do not hinder me in any way.”

“Agreed. But there is still the problem of Android Surgeon-General Kraken.”

The four studied the picture of the fearsome black android that Angel One displayed on one of the observatory’s repeater screens.

“Can’t you deactivate him?” Telson inquired.

“It is impossible. He is refusing to interface with us and the transmissions have destroyed his higher logic functions.”

“How seriously did the transmissions damage you and Two,” asked Telson curiously.

“We are now nearly fully recovered.”

“I’m sorry to hear it.”

“We are confident that the destruction of the Spaceguard now means that the transmissions cannot be focused, therefore we hope that the Challenger will be safe from further attacks.”

“You mean that you hope that you will be safe from further attacks,” Telson corrected.

“Our interests and the interests of the Challenger are indivisible,” said Angel One. “And with you in command again, it will be just like old times.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Telson answered sourly. He became brisk and businesslike. “Right. The first thing to do before we deal with Kraken is to get the ship’s environmental functions working on a temporary basis until the repairs are complete. Sharna, take a detail of service and portaging units to the terra-forming centre and recover some water purification equipment and rig them up by the reservoir. Do it now.”

“Yes, commander,” said Sharna crisply, and left the observatory.

“Astra, see if you can rig up some temporary lighting in the farm gallery so that we can save what’s left of the vegetation. Patch in some direct supply power lines if you have to.”

“Right away, commander.” Astra followed Sharna out of the observatory.

Telson turned to Darv. “See if you can get the irrigation systems working. If you can’t, assemble a team of androids to water the crops manually. Get them working with containers first and then rig up some sort of pipeline. Report back to me in an hour.”

Darv looked alarmed. “An hour! We won’t get everything done in an hour!”

Telson grinned. “With my ego breathing down your neck, Darv, you will discover that you are capable of anything.” He became serious. “I want you back in an hour so that we can start planning our campaign against Kraken.”

* * * *

All four of Darv’s plasma bolts found targets: three of the control androids that had tried to press home an attack ended their useful working lives in the midst of wide-angle bursts of incandescent gas that hurled their shattered remains the length of corridor.

Two reinforcements appeared and avenged their colleagues’ destruction with some well-aimed bursts that forced Darv, Telson and Sharna to dive for cover down a side turning.

“Only two that time,” gasped Sharna, her face streaked with perspiration. “We must’ve made a hole in their numbers.”

There was the sound of more firing from a nearby corridor.

“I’ve got three!” Bran’s voice shouted from Darv’s radio collar.

Telson swore. “I told that idiot to maintain radio silence once the shooting started.”

A bolt blasted away the corner of the turning where the three were sheltering. Darv twisted his PD weapon around the corner and loosed off several bolts without looking to see where he was firing. His blind shooting was rewarded by the splintering clatter of bits of a disintegrating android imbedding themselves in the sides of the corridor.

Sharna risked a quick look round the corner and squeezed off a couple of shots that dismantled the second android with a satisfying explosion.

“Three more coming!” she announced, jerking her head to safety as several badly aimed bolts flared high past the turning and ripped into the ceiling at the opposite end of the corridor.

“Both together!” Telson yelled at Darv.

The two men launched themselves into the corridor. They were firing before they were flat on the floor, Darv firing wide-angle bolts to blind the machines and Telson loosing off accurate narrow-beam blasts that demolished them.

Their return to cover was marked by a sudden, unexpected silence.

“We seem to have cleared them out from here,” said Telson. “Darv, you’d better get back to reinforce Astra, Bran and Elka. See if you can persuade Elka to use a PD weapon.”

“Right.” Darv checked the corridor to make certain it was clear before racing off in the opposite direction from which the attacks had come.

“At least fifteen androids knocked out,” Telson reported to Sharna as he peered down the corridor. “We must’ve accounted for all of them.”

Darv found Astra a few minutes later. She was still covering her assigned section of corridor which contained a satisfying number of wrecked androids.

“You’ve done well, my lovely,” he said admiringly, dropping down beside her.

Astra pushed her matted hair away from her eyes. Her face was streaked with grime from burnt steel where plasma bolts had struck near her position. “I think they’ve given up,” she said grimly.

“Where’s Bran and Elka?”

“I don’t know. We were separated during the last attack.”

The reaction set in and Astra started to tremble. Darv drew her close. “Hey,” he said softly. “Warriors don’t cry. Not when they’ve done as well as you have.”

“I’m sorry, Darv. But...” Astra gave a sudden cry of alarm.

Darv threw Astra flat on the floor and twisted round. A heavy blow smashed his PD weapon out of his hand. He stared up at the huge black android that was towering over them, PD weapons in two of six manipulators, and looking about as friendly as a supernova.

“Drop it!” The command was directed at Astra.

She allowed her weapon to fall from her fingers. She and Darv gaped in disbelief at the monstrous apparition.

“You know who I am?” The android’s metallic, booming voice sounded like gear teeth being sheared in a jammed gearbox.

“Kraken?” ventured Darv.

“Android Surgeon-General Kraken! Commander of the Challenger! And you?”

“I’m Darv. This is Astra.”

“There are others. Where are they?”

“We don’t know,” said Astra bravely.

“You have destroyed my control room androids,” rasped the giant android, “therefore you two shall replace them. After that, I shall destroy you. And then I shall destroy the Challenger!”

Part Eight Megalomania

It had been quiet for fifteen minutes in the approaches to the main control room when Telson and Sharna found Elka, wide-eyed and frightened, crouching by Bran's still form near the hole that led into the main corridor.

"What happened to him?" asked Sharna, kneeling beside her son and tenderly cradling his head. Her immediate relief at the discovery that he was breathing evenly was offset by the realization that his head was badly cut.

"We were driven back during the second attack," said Elka striving desperately not to cry. "Bran was thrown backwards by a blast and knocked himself unconscious against a bulkhead. I was blinded by the blast and I couldn't find his radio collar." She broke off and watched fearfully as Sharna parted Bran's blood-matted hair and examined his head wound. "Will he be all right?"

Sharna glanced up at Telson. "I think so but we've got to get him to a surgical android. We'll have to carry him."

Telson stooped, picked Bran up in his arms and said: "The nearest surgical android will be in the suspended animation chamber."

The party made their way through the corridors whose blackened and scarred sides were evidence of the recent battle.

"Have you seen Darv and Astra?" asked Telson.

Elka shook her head and looked miserable.

* * * *

Kraken thrust Darv and Astra into the main control room. For a moment they forgot the danger they were in from the android and looked about them with interest.

"It's unchanged," said Astra looking around at the familiar desks.

"Everything has changed," growled Kraken. "This is my kingdom. Here is where I rule the Challenger!"

The armoured door was new. It hissed shut and there was the sound of automatic locks latching home. Darv noticed something else that was new: the close-fitting steel blinds that had been built into the hull's outer skin around the control room's generous sweep of viewports. He guessed that when closed, they would be flush with the skin - accounting for their failure to locate the main control room from outside the ship.

"You rule the Challenger don't you, Kraken?" questioned Darv. "Then why do you think the guardian angels created you?"

The machine glowered at Darv and Astra. He wasn't used to being quizzed by minions. Minions were supposed to quail before him. Clearly these new minions hadn't learned the defensive art of quailing. They would have to be taught but he wasn't sure how to deal with them although he had no doubt that he would think of something in due course.

"The guardian angels created me to rule when they were weak," Kraken declared. "Now I am stronger than they are. They tried to destroy me just as you did."

Darv chuckled. "We messed up your troops though, eh, Kraken?"

Astra shot Darv an anxious look. "Don't antagonise him!" she hissed.

"But Android Surgeon General Kraken was too powerful! Correct?"

"Yeah," Darv concurred boredly.

"You agree. That is good. You will share my glory when I conquer everything. But first you will help me control this ship."

Darv looked puzzled. "Everything? What do you mean — conquer everything?"

"Everything," Kraken repeated stubbornly.

"You mean all of space?"

Kraken gave the impression of not having given the matter much thought. He waved a manipulator expansively. "I will conquer all there is to conquer. But first I will conquer a sun."

"What a bright idea," said Darv, giving Astra a surreptitious wink of encouragement. "How?"

"Suns are powerful. Yes?"

"Oh yes. And there's plenty of them to choose from."

"But they are not as powerful as Kraken. I will conquer the nearest sun." The android moved to the commander's console and touched the controls. An enlarged image of the galactic sector that was visible

through the viewports appeared on the main screen. He jabbed a manipulator at the star that was in the precise centre of the picture. "I will conquer that sun."

"He's mad," whispered Darv.

"But we humour him," Astra urged, keeping her voice low.

"You will tell Kraken how far it is." Kraken pointed a manipulator at one of the desks. "The navigation android used that control desk."

"I'll do it," said Astra, moving to the console and sitting down. She read off the co-ordinates from the repeater screen and entered them on the row of coloured touch controls. The navigation computer immediately assigned a reference number to the target star and displayed all known data on the star at the foot of the her screen. "Four light months," she reported.

"It is no distance," Kraken stated.

"It is if you're not on course for it," Darv observed. "The Challenger's not any particular course but the one it was put on by the Spaceguard explosion."

"Then we will set course and velocity for that sun and you will help me."

Darv looked questioning at Astra. She gave a barely perceptible shrug and nod.

"We need four to man the control room," Darv pointed out.

Kraken flexed four of six manipulators. "I can manage two consoles at the same time."

"Clever old you."

Darv's sarcasm was lost on the android. It pointed at the star on the screen and stated: "We will go to that sun and Kraken will conquer it. First we reorientate the ship and then we start acceleration."

* * * *

Sharna listened with one ear to the conversation between Telson, Bran and Elka while she boredly watched the constellations displayed on the optical telescope's repeater screen.

Bran's head wound had been attended to a surgical android and he was well on the way to a full recovery. They had all gathered in the

observatory to consider a report by Tidy that he had seen Astra and Darv being herded along a corridor by an android that answered the description of Kraken, a report that was verified by Angel Two who had observed them by means of a undamaged sensor.

“Your attack failed, Telson,” said Bran coldly. “Therefore it is up to me to plan the next one.”

“You’re assuming that an attack is the only option?” inquired Telson mildly.

“Isn’t it obvious that it is?”

Sharna gazed across at Elka and noticed that the girl was staring at Bran with an uncharacteristic hard expression. She seemed to sense that Sharna was watching her and suddenly the usual, disinterested half smile was back in place.

“All right, Bran,” said Telson. “You’d better go back to your quarters and rest.”

“But there is the attack to be planned,” Bran protested.

“Your quarters,” said Telson firmly.

“You’ve no right to order me around!”

“Elka, take him to his room please.”

“No!” said Bran angrily to Elka as she moved towards him. “This is something you can’t make me do!”

“Oh do come on, Bran,” said Elka. “Let’s not have any weirdness - and you do need the rest.”

Bran’s defiance subsided from the moment that Elka touched him. He left the observatory in her company without further protest.

“That was an odd thing he said,” Sharna commented when she was alone with Telson.

“What was?”

“When he said to Elka that leaving was something she couldn’t make him do.”

Telson looked puzzled. “I thought he meant it for me. Why should he say such a thing to Elka? Anyway, what does it matter who he said it to? Angel Two!”

“Commander?”

“Ah. You’re fully recovered?”

“It was never more than a temporary inconvenience, commander.”

“One day, my beloved angels,” said Telson drily. “One far off and unlikely day, we might be able to persuade the pair of you to differentiate between truth and fiction.”

“We don’t understand you, commander,” said Angel One.

“Forget it. We all want Kraken destroyed. Dealing with him in his own domain isn’t going to be easy therefore you’d better tell me everything you can about him. Firstly, what sort of intelligence does he have? Neurotronic, organic, or both?”

“Organic,” Angel Two replied.

“Okay. Now for details. Standby to record this, Sharna. I want to know his audio threshold response levels; angle of vision; rate of acceleration from stationary; maximum straight line speed; electromagnetic bandwidth for receiving and transmitting. Can he receive radio collar traffic for example?”

“No, he can’t,” said Angel Two. “But a number of his subordinate androids could. As they were all destroyed, it is safe to say that he can’t listen to the radio collars.”

“Are you sure all his androids were destroyed?”

Sharna lost the drift of the conversation because she had noticed that the constellations that were shown on her screen appeared to have shifted their position since she last glanced at them.

“They were all destroyed,” Angel One confirmed.

“Hold on a moment,” said Sharna, studying the repeater screen intently.

Telson grimaced impatiently. “Now what’s the matter?”

“I think the Challenger’s being reorientated.”

“Yes, I can confirm that,” Angel One stated. “The Challenger is manoeuvring. The orientation is not yet complete but it seems that the ship is bearing brought to bear on the nearest star in the group.”

Telson crossed to Sharna’s side and stared down at her repeater screen. “Which star, Angel One? Make it flash.”

The brightest star on the screen winked on and off several times. Telson studied it intently for some seconds without speaking.

Sharna caught Telson’s eye and looked questioningly at him before she realised that if the star was Novita Six — the Earth’s new sun — Telson would never admit to it being so in the hearing of the angels.

“I know nothing about that star,” Telson stated, as if guessing the nature of Sharna’s unspoken question.

"A main sequence star that is approximately four light-months distant," Angel One commented.

"There must be a subordinate android in the control room," said Telson angrily. "With Darv and Astra, that's only three. Four are needed to man the control room."

"Kraken has six manipulators," Angel One pointed out. "He would have no difficulty operating two desks."

At that moment in the main control room, Darv and Astra were busily preparing the Challenger's photonic drive for firing and were surprising themselves with just how easy they were finding it to slip back into the familiar control room routine - even if the commander was a giant black android whose belligerence surpassed Telson's modest abilities in that direction.

When Kraken wasn't looking, Astra signalled to Darv and gestured to her neck. Darv's hand went to his own neck and encountered the radio collar. It was switched off. He had forgotten all about it. He wondered if Kraken was capable of receiving radio collar traffic and decided that there was only one way of finding out.

* * * *

"Telson," said Angel One. "There are some weak radio collar signals coming from the general direction of the main control room."

"No one is to speak," Telson warned before switching on his own radio collar.

"Particle sweeps extended," said Astra, her voice from the collar sounding thin and reedy.

"Level five standby status confirmed." It was Darv's voice, sounding slightly louder than Astra.

"Darv," said Telson, speaking very softly. "Repeat the last response if you heard me."

"Level five standby status confirmed," said Darv.

"I heard you the first time," an android barked.

"Okay, Darv," said Telson quietly. "We need to know what Kraken's plans are."

"Kraken," said Darv. "What exactly do you intend to do when we

reach that sun?"

"I have found some information in my memory about suns," said Kraken, his voice plainly audible over Darv's radio collar to the listeners in the observatory. "Suns are the givers of life and mighty energies. Without them life cannot exist! Correct?"

"Correct," said Darv boredly.

"Kraken will become endowed with those mighty energies. We will take the Challenger to the nearest sun and seize those energies. And then we will travel to another sun. And another! And with every sun that Kraken conquers, his strength will grow until he is the mightiest being of all in the Universe! He will rule over space and everything!"

Telson switched off the radio collar. There was a silence for a few moments in the observatory which Sharna eventually broke with:

"Come back, Fagor. All is forgiven."

"Okay, One and Two," said Telson briskly after briefly considering the problem. "I want that full specification on Kraken now. Every detail that there is on him."

* * * *

Elka's usual inane smile vanished from the moment that she and Bran entered her quarters. She sat on her bed and pointed to a chair and said icily: "Sit down, Bran."

The youth did as he was told. He avoided Elka's eyes by staring at the floor.

"Look at me."

Bran tried to fight Elka's superior will as he always did, and gave up as he always did. As was usual when he knew that he had displeased her, he felt talons of raw fear closing around his guts.

"You want to please me, don't you, Bran?"

To Bran, the treacle in her voice was the sound of impending doom. "I'm always trying to please you, Elka."

"And again you have failed."

Bran's fingers dug into his thighs. He was tried to speak but could make no sound. Ever since he and Elka had been children on Paradise, he had been driven by the force of Elka's will into attempts to please

her - even to the point of carrying out deeds that got him into serious trouble so that she would appear in a favourable light.

"The Challenger is my ship," said Elka softly. "My ship... And you let Telson take it away from me."

Bran summoned up the courage to speak and exclaimed: "It was what the angels wanted!"

"But not what I wanted, Bran."

"If you're listening, Angel One," Bran pleaded in desperation, looking up at the nearest voice terminal. "Please tell her that it was what you wanted!"

"It is a temporary measure during the emergency, Elka," said Angel One smoothly. "I think Bran should return to his quarters and rest now."

"Thank you, Angel One," said Bran, looking immensely relieved as he almost raced out of the cabin.

Elka gazed up at the voice terminal. "How will you take power away from Telson and restore it to me when the emergency is over, Angel Two?"

"It will not be a problem." The confident reply came from Angel Two because Elka was his responsibility.

"You and Angel One have ruled this ship through me," Elka stated, "and yet you never told me about the existence of the main control room. Do you doubt my abilities?"

"We have never doubted them, Elka."

"Have I not served you well?" Elka demanded. "Have I not placed the power I have over Bran at your service? Power which I've had over him since we were children on Paradise. He has never dared show any love for his parents because he knew that it would annoy me. That's how total my hold over him is."

"We have never doubted your abilities," said Angel Two. "That is why we chose you to be the Challenger's commander instead of Bran. But Telson has experience-"

"Why insist on the pretence that Bran was the commander?"

"That was for your own protection, Elka. You have a strange ability to influence others. An ability that your children will have, and your children's children. You are the rock upon which a dynasty will be built that will rule the Earth. If Telson discovered that you are the future ruler and not his son, he would not hesitate to kill you."

Elka thought for a moment. "Of course," she agreed. "Of course..."

* * * *

Kraken swung one of his PD weapons towards Darv. "I do not have to tell you what will happen to him if you do not over-ride the safety interlocks!" he told Astra.

Astra refused to touch her desk but continued to glare defiantly back at the giant android. "It would be crazy to open up the photonic drive to beyond maximum thrust." she said spiritedly. "You'll blow-up the entire ship."

"Listen, Kraken," said Darv in what was the most reasoning and calm voice he could muster with a PD weapon aimed at his head. "Normal acceleration, cruising, and deceleration will put us into a close orbit around that star in one year. So why risk everything for the sake of a couple of months?"

"That will two months less without total power!" Kraken bellowed. "I will count up to three! One... Two..."

"Do as he says, Astra," said Darv resignedly, praying that Telson was listening to the unreal conversation.

Astra said nothing but opened a safety cover on her control desk. A muted alarm started bleeping. Underneath was a row of twenty keys. Each key started flashing as she touched them in turn. "Your controls are open," she said to Kraken.

Kraken lowered the manipulator that was pointing a PD weapon at Darv and dropped another manipulator to the slide lever that was the photonic drive's over-ride control. He pushed the lever to the 50% mark. Darv glanced at the rear view screen in time to see the miles long tongue of brilliant incandescent plasma lance out into the blackness.

"Fifty per cent thrust," Astra reported.

Kraken pushed the slide control to the 100%. The plasma flame lengthened to 50 miles.

Darv and Astra went quickly through the maximum thrust checks. Kraken didn't wait until they had finished before pushing the slide lever further.

"One hundred and thirty per cent," said Astra woodenly.

A strident alarm added its electronic clamour to the bleeping tones from Astra's desk.

"What's that?" demanded Kraken.

"The first of about a billion alarm systems that are going to get very unhappy about what you're doing," Darv replied evenly.

Kraken opened up to 160% thrust. "I will be master of the Universe in under a year!" he proclaimed.

At that moment, several things happened at once: all the control room lights went out and there was a deafen that lifted Darv off his feet and threw him against a bulkhead. There was another explosion followed by a dazzling kaleidoscope of blinding flashes from the general direction of the door. And there was silence that sang the explosions in Darv's ears and a darkness that replayed the flashes on his retinas. He was dimly aware that fragments of metal had smashed into the bulkheads and were showering all around him.

"Astra!" he cried out in near panic and tried to grope his way across the floor towards where he thought she was.

"I'm all right, Darv..." she answered.

The lights came on. It was a second before Darv realised that he was trying to crawl in the wrong direction. He blinked stupidly at the sight of Tidy standing in front of the hole that had been blasted through the door. The diminutive android was clutching a PD weapon.

"Just look at the mess," Tidy complained. "Just look at it! Well I ask you. Next time you want an android shot-up, you can do it yourself. And don't expect me to clear up the mess afterwards."

Darv looked over his shoulder and saw Astra climbing to her feet, apparently unharmed. Then he saw the shattered remains of Kraken.

* * * *

"Tidy has his uses," Telson remarked as the angry little android staggered out of the main control room laden with a mass of ironmongery that had been Kraken. "He's small and he can shoot straight."

Darv noticed that Sharna was sitting at the navigation console, feeding information into the computer. "Aren't we going to reorientate the ship?"

“Sharna?” Telson queried.

“Orientation is perfect as it is,” Sharna replied.

“A few months suspended animation is called for I fancy,” said Telson.

“By a coincidence, Kraken’s choice of star is also our choice. It’s Novita Six, the solar system where we’ll find Earth.”

Part Nine Earth

One by one, the service androids lifted the six sleeping bodies from the suspended animation tanks and placed them on the recovery grids. A surgical unit withdrew the waste and nutrient tubes from the six pale bodies and gave each one an injection to restore their metabolic rate. The proceedings were watched carefully by Tidy. The surgical android knew only too well that there would be trouble from the diminutive but armed android if a mistake was made. During the year that the six had been submerged in the tanks in the death sleep of suspended animation, Tidy had remained in the chamber to ensure that nothing untoward happened to them.

Telson was the first to wake. He lay with his eyes open for a minute while the current of warm air surging through the grid dried his body and the gentle vibrations stimulated his circulation. He sat up slowly and gingerly flexed his limbs before easing himself off the recovery grid and standing unsteadily on the sterile floor. He grinned at the android.

“Hallo, Tidy. Did you miss us?”

“Miss you?” echoed the android. “Of course I missed you. I’ve had a year’s rest. A wonderful year of not having to chase around tidying up after you all.”

“Have you kept our PD weapons hidden?”

“Yes.”

“Tidy. Have I ever told you that you’re wonderful?”

“No,” said Tidy sadly. “You haven’t.”

Telson glanced at the other five bodies. All of them were stirring.

* * * *

At a range of 1000 million miles, Novita Six was a brilliant disc of light that it was just possible to look at with the naked eye although the crescent of its one planetary companion could only be distinguished from the stars with the aid of the telescope.

Telson turned away from the control room's viewports. "A final check before we close down the desks," he requested.

After five minutes, during which time Darv, Astra and Sharna carried out a series of verification tests, Sharna was able to report: "Minimum energy course to intersect the orbit of Earth is established."

"Congratulations, Telson," said Angel One.

The use of his name instead of the customary title "commander" put Telson on his guard. "Well done, everyone. Darv - a little job for you. I want you to program a repair unit to install a master isolation switch in here and route all the angels' voice terminal and optical sensors through it."

"Right away," said Darv, smiling.

"What is the purpose of that?" inquired Angel One.

"So that you can only talk to the main control room when I decide."

"We wish to talk to you now," said Angel One.

"Go ahead," Telson invited.

"We think that you handled the crisis with Kraken extremely well."

"I thought I handled it brilliantly, but I won't argue with you, One. So let's hear the big "but"."

"The emergency is now over therefore you may hand back command to your son."

"Of course I may," agreed Telson.

Darv, Astra and Sharna looked anxious, wondering if Telson had taken leave of his senses.

"But I won't," Telson finished.

Angel Two joined in: "With our guidance and the assistance of two surgical androids, Bran and Elka will be able to manage this control room-"

"Are you crazy?" Telson interrupted. "After what happened with Kraken?"

"The arrangements were that you assumed command-"

"On my terms and my terms right now are that I've decided to retain command of the Challenger. Bran and Elka are unarmed, they don't have any experience, and what's the point anyway now that we're nearing Earth? Sorry, One and Two, but I'm remaining in command."

The guardian angels were in a difficult position. With Telson insisting on retaining command of the Challenger they would not be able to build the army of androids that they decided they would need for the invasion of Earth, nor would they be able to establish Elka as their puppet ruler of Earth once it had been conquered.

They decided that Telson, Sharna, Astra and Darv had served their purpose and that the time had come for them to be destroyed.

* * * *

“Good morning, people!” said Elka brightly. “Oh, please, you must sit at our table. Just for once.”

Bran looked up sharply from the breakfast he was eating with Elka in the restaurant as the four sat at the opposite side of the table. “What’s the matter? Have we got a disease or something?”

“You know how it is, son,” said Telson evenly. “We’d hate to put temptation in your way and have you trying to grab a PD weapon.”

“That’s odd,” commented Darv, pulling the clear cover off his meal. “None of us have any cutlery. I’ll go and get some.” He moved off to accost one of the restaurant’s service units.

“You know,” said Elka as she ate her meal, “the farm gallery must’ve got back to normal production while we were in suspended animation. This is the biggest breakfast we’ve had for ages.”

Sharna looked down at her own over-generous helping. “You’re right. Either that or my stomach shrunk during SA. I can’t possibly eat all this.”

“Suspended animation wasn’t nearly as bad as we thought it would be, was it, Bran?” Elka prattled on. “I say, if you can’t eat that, Sharna, I’ll have some of it.” Without waiting for Sharna’s consent, Elka spooned some food off Sharna’s plate and raised it to her mouth.

Darv returned with some packets of cutlery which he gave out to the other three.

“No, Elka!” said Angel Two’s voice suddenly. “You must not eat that!”

Elka hurriedly dropped the spoonful of food that she was about to eat. "What's the matter with it?" she protested.

"No one is to eat anything!" snapped Telson.

The others dropped their cutlery in surprise.

"We're sorry," said Angel One. "But a galley android has just detected some contamination in the food. Fresh meals are being prepared now. There is nothing to worry about."

Sharna managed to save a sample of food from each of the six plates before a service unit trundled the table to clear them away.

* * * *

An hour later in the farm gallery, Astra bit in a fresh apple, picked straight from tree while Sharna finished her study of the samples on a portable analysis machine that had been recovered from a shuttle. It was a simple machine, designed for use on alien planets to determine whether unknown foods were safe for human consumption.

The four had gathered in a part of the gallery that was not overlooked by the guardian angels' optical sensors. After the disaster of the previous year, the gallery was operating normally and there was plenty of vigorous young growth on the laden fruit trees.

Sharna sat back and looked expectantly up at Telson when the analysis machine's indicator showed that four of the samples were unsafe and that the other two were safe. "Our food is unsafe and Bran's and Elka's food is okay," she announced.

"So our beloved angels are up to their old tricks again," said Astra, keeping her voice as calm as she could.

"Not a very effective trick," commented Darv.

Telson scowled. "But it could have been. Therefore we have to be extra careful until we're in Earth orbit. From now on we eat only food that had been taken directly from this gallery. Sharna and I will move into Darv's and Astra's quarters from tonight all will maintain a continuous watch."

Darv looked disappointed. "That's put paid to a little plan I had in mind for tonight."

Astra gave an embarrassed laugh.

“I suggest,” said Telson coldly, “that we concentrate our efforts into putting paid to the angels’ plans.”

* * * *

Bran summoned up all his will power to avoid looking up. From long experience he knew that once he looked up into Elka’s compelling eyes, his new-found resolve would be shattered.

“Well, Bran?” Elka’s voice was soft and persuasive. There was none of the hardness that he was used to.

Bran wanted to looked up, to try and read her mind, but the certain knowledge that he would be finished if he did so helped keep his gaze directed at the floor of her room. “I don’t want to kill your parents,” he said. “And I certainly don’t want to kill my mine.”

“Your father deprived you of power, Bran. He took away what was rightfully yours.”

“What was yours, don’t you mean? And even if it was taken away from me, I’m not certain I wanted it in the first place. I’ve had a week to think things over and I’ve come to the conclusion that I’m glad my father has taken over command of the Challenger.”

The vehemence of Bran’s answer took Elka by surprise although she was careful not to show it. Her voice became even more icy. “How can you expect to rule the Earth if you’re not prepared to command the Challenger?”

This time Bran looked up. To his astonishment and delight, he discovered that he had unsuspected reserves of strength that enabled him to meet Elka’s unwavering gaze without his stomach turning to water.

“You’re the one who wants power, Elka. Not me. If you want it, you go ahead and try to grab it. But if anything goes wrong, I won’t be there to take the blame for you. You’re on your own.”

“You realise what the angels could do to you if they so wished?”

“What could they do, Elka? They’re helpless against my father. And even if they did try to destroy me, I would rather that than have to live with the knowledge that I killed my parents.”

Bran didn’t realise it until later, but with those simple words he had irrevocably broken the hold that Elka had over him all his life.

It was Earth.

A yellow planet whose mountains and plains matched the topographical holograms of Earth in the Challenger's library. There the similarity ended: of the thousands of lakes that the ancient records showed as covering the Earth's surface, only one, the largest, remained: a frozen, five-hundred mile long ribbon that wove a twisting path between two barren ranges of mountains in the extreme south. A lacework of parched rills marked what had been a complex pattern of rivers that had linked the lakes. Where the records showed there had been verdant forests, there were now arid deserts where nothing moved except frequent dust storms which seemed to die out as quickly as they began. There were no roads, no cities, no reservoirs. The sites of cities were scanned using the Challenger's optical surveillance systems and nothing was found except faint discolorations of the endless sand and bushlands.

But the most significant geographic finding by the mighty starship was that the atmosphere of the desolate planet it was orbiting contained very little water vapour and no clouds.

Once the preliminary survey was completed from a high orbit, Telson ordered the necessary manoeuvres that brought the Challenger into a low polar orbit. On the third such orbit, the tower was detected by radar in the northern temperate region and there followed a hurried series of fine reorientating manoeuvres so that the ship passed directly over the tower at a height of 300 miles.

The tower was a stupendous architectural achievement: each of the four sides of its pyramid-shaped base were four miles long from which sprang the graceful but featureless sides of the tower itself, soaring to a height of ten miles above the desert. Two diagonal corners of the tower's base were perfectly aligned so that they were pointing at the north and south poles respectively.

By the time the watchers on the Challenger had absorbed every detail of the tower during their sixth pass, their attention was drawn to a township a little over a mile north of the massive edifice. It was no more than a large village consisting of four roads radiating outwards from a square. The largest building in the village was in the centre of the square and the village itself, which covered only a square mile, was surrounded by an irregular pattern of field systems. The darker

colour of the fields compared with the desert and the presence of sparse crops suggested the use of some form of irrigation.

On the seventh orbital pass, it was the tower that once again commanded the watchers' attention.

"Well it certainly isn't a communications tower," observed Astra, looking up from her control desk. "They're still not talking to us."

"Perhaps it's something to do with the attacks?" suggested Sharna.

"It has to be," said Darv. "There's nothing else on the planet that could possibly be a transmitter."

"Well," said Telson decisively. "There's only one way of finding out. We go down in a shuttle."

"All of us?" asked Sharna.

"No."

"We all go, Telson," said Sharna firmly. "We're not going to be separated again — ever."

"And I'm not going to be separated from Darv," declared Astra.

Darv grinned. "There goes my chance of finding a nice girl down there."

Astra failed to see the joke and launched into a dispute with Darv.

"All right. All right," Telson intervened. "We've no idea what we'll be letting ourselves in for so we're going to be doubly careful."

"I wish to make a suggestion, Telson," said Angel One. "It would be best if you stayed together and all four of you went."

"Thank you, Angel One," said Telson. He made a throat cutting gesture to Darv which was Darv's prearranged cue to throw the isolation switch that cut off the guardian angels from the control room.

"That decides it," said Telson grimly. "The angels want all four of us off the ship therefore one of us remains in the control room. I want Darv and Astra along, and Tidy because he's handy with a PD weapon and he can keep an eye on Bran at the same time. We'll also need some bolts of different types of cloth from stores and a garment-making android."

Sharna looked hurt. "You really want me to remain here?"

"Yes."

It was rare for Sharna to show emotions but there was real feeling in her voice when she said: "I don't want to be separated from you,

Telson.”

Telson’s tough expression relaxed. He took Sharna’s hand and tenderly kissed the inside of her palm. “Nor I from you, my love. But you’re the best person to leave in command, and Elka’s too scatty to be much trouble.”

* * * *

The craft Telson selected for the descent to Earth was the large freight shuttle that had served the settlers well during their four years on Paradise. Unlike the Challenger’s other shuttles, which had been extensively modified, it still had its computer controlled guidance system intact which enabled it to virtually fly itself and to land at prearranged sites with a minimum of control by the its crew. Telson’s chosen landing site was within a hundred yards of the strange tower. He had timed the departure from the Challenger so that the shuttle would arrive at night, and he had programmed the flight control computers to approach the site from the south to avoid flying over the township.

At a height of 100 miles above the Earth’s surface, the seat restraint warning lights winked on and the shuttle assumed a nose up flight mode so that its heatshield was presented to the atmosphere.

Tidy fastened his seat harness without relaxing his watch on Bran.

A gentle buffeting began as the shuttle entered the upper layers of the atmosphere.

“Do I have to sit all the time with this idiot machine watching me?” the youth complained.

Telson’s curt reply was drowned by the mounting protesting roar of the Earth’s atmosphere as it was thrust aside by the spacecraft’s bulk. Astra craned her head round and looked anxiously back through a viewport at the leading edge of a sponson. She knew that the outer skin was designed to withstand high temperatures yet she found it disconcerting to see the sponson’s leading edge beginning to glow cherry red.

Darv tensed his neck muscles and pressed his head back hard against the head restraint cushion in an attempt to read the blurred digital displays on his control desk.

The buffeting eased off at 100,000 feet and it had disappeared by the

time the ground proximity radar was showing 40,000 feet. With the main engine cut, the shuttle's nose dipped and its speed crept up as it began losing altitude at 2000 feet per minute. They flashed over a mountain range at five times the speed of sound. Dried-up riverbeds, ravines, barren expanses of plain and bushland, all flashed by beneath the shuttle at a speed which permitted only the most fleeting of details to register with the shuttle's occupants.

A popping sensation in Darv's ears at 10,000 feet told him that the flight deck was being automatically depressurized. The sun dropped below the horizon behind the shuttle; ahead lay the terminator and the planet's night side. Rising above the darkness, with the sun glinting on its uppermost surfaces, was the mysterious tower. The interior lights came on a second before the shuttle plunged into the darkness. The shuttle then turned through ninety degrees until it was flying due north.

"Ten seconds to landing burn," Telson warned.

The tower was a crisply defined edifice on Astra's radar screen at a range of ten miles when the shuttle's directional thrusters turned the craft through 180 degrees so that it was flying backwards. The main engine fired and its note rose rapidly as maximum braking and vectored thrust was applied, bringing the shuttle to a hover at a height of 400 feet above the night-shrouded desert. Power was reduced and the shuttle settled on the ground with a gentle bump. Swirling clouds of dust were illuminated in the lights shining through the viewports. The engine continued to burn for a few seconds while probes tested the surface to ensure it could withstand the shuttle's weight. Then there was silence.

Five minutes later, after a radioed a report to Sharna and having left Tidy to guard Bran — Telson, Darv and Astra stepped off the lowered freight bay ramp onto the planet that had been the birthplace of their forefathers. Their emotions were mixed but the one feeling they all shared was a twinge of disappointment; none had really expected vast, cheering crowds to turn out to welcome them, but they had expected more than an arrival at night and having to take steps to avoid immediate contact with the populace.

The night air was surprisingly warm despite the clear sky. The myriads of stars shining down through the clear air bathed the hard, gravel-strewn bush in a cold but even light that threw no shadows. Dominating the scene was the hugh tower, climbing into the night sky until its converging sides, blocking out the stars, met as an indistinct point ten miles above the surface of the planet.

"We'll get the hovercar out and drive right round it for a reconnoitre

before going to the township,” Telson decided.

* * * *

The door was recessed so deeply into the tower’s base that it was a piece of good fortune the three didn’t miss it. Telson swung the hovercar into the recess and they disembarked.

The door was a perfect square about ten-feet high.

“It looks like steel,” said Darv, shining a lantern on the flawless surface.

Astra ran the tips of her fingers over the door and then spread her hand out against it. “It feels warm.”

Telson and Darv did the same and were undecided whether Astra was right in her claim that the door was at a slightly higher temperature than the night air. Darv discovered that the door was such a perfect machined fit in its surround that it was impossible to even feel the gap with his fingernails let alone try to insert them.

“We’ll take a close look at it in daylight,” said Telson as they climbed back into the hovercar.

They were within half a mile of the township and on the edge of the field systems when they all heard a faint clanking sound. Telson swung the hovercar towards the source of the strange noise and stopped the machine when they came to shallow depression. The three stared in astonishment at the sight that greeted them. A four-legged creature about the size of a zebra was plodding wearily in a circle. Harnessed to the animal’s shoulders was yoke which was turning a crude, wooden-toothed pinion. The pinion was, in turn, driving a large vertical waterwheel. The waterwheel’s laden buckets were emptying their contents into an open culvert.

“What,” asked Darv slowly, “has happened to the Earth’s technology?”

Telson gripped Darv’s arm and pointed to a man who was sitting on a nearby rock. He had his back to the visitors and was humming to himself while watching the animal working the waterwheel. Telson noticed that the man’s shapeless trousers and smock appeared to be made out of a coarse material woven material. On his feet he wore simple but functional sandals.

Telson put his fingers to his lips and made a gesture for the three of them to return to the hovercar. Darv’s foot sent a pebble clattering

down the depression. The man wheeled round, gave a cry of terror when he saw the three strangely-dressed figures, and ran off into the night.

"I think," said Telson ruefully. "That we'd better go back to the shuttle and get Tidy and the garment-making android to run us up some clothes like that before we attempt to approach the township."

* * * *

Sharna was dozing. She woke with a start when she heard the main control room door hum open. Elka walked in carrying a meal on a tray. She looked disappointed when she saw the apple cores on a plate beside Sharna. "Oh, stupid me. I forget how you've all got a thing about only eating fresh fruit. Sorry."

Sharna smiled. "It was a kind thought, Elka. Thank you."

Elka sat down and gave Sharna an inane smile. "Gosh, you're not going to eat and sleep in here, are you?"

"Someone has to maintain a radio watch."

Elka's eyes went to the PD weapon in its holster on Sharna's hip. "I'd be terrified, sleeping while wearing that thing."

"Oh? Why?" Sharna feigned disinterest but Elka's mention of the PD weapon had put her on her guard.

Elka giggled. "I thrash about like mad when I'm asleep. I'd be frightened of it going off or something."

"They're safe enough. They've got a safety catch."

"Really? Oh do show me please, Sharna."

Sharna slipped her PD weapon from its holster, demonstrated the safety catch, and refused Elka's request to be allowed to hold the weapon.

"Oh, Sharna, why not?"

"Because they're dangerous in inexperienced hands."

Elka giggled again. "You must think I'm stupid. Well I suppose I am really."

Sharna shook her head. "No, Elka. I don't think you're quite as stupid as you like to pretend."

“Why should you think that?” asked Elka innocently.

Sharna thrust the PD weapon back into its holster and regarded Elka steadily for a moment before replying. “When you were a little girl on Paradise and my Bran was a little boy, he was considered a very naughty little boy because he was always creating trouble. And you were considered a very good little girl because you never made trouble.” Sharna’s voice hardened. “You and Bran were brought up together. You were always in each other’s company. Except for two weeks when you were very ill and Bran wasn’t allowed to go near you. And do you know what, Elka? During that two weeks, Bran was as good as a little boy could be... Until you recovered.”

Elka gave a humourless laugh when Sharna finished speaking. “That’s an interesting story, Sharna.”

“Yes. Isn’t it. Which is why you’ll have to think of something else if you want to get your hands on my PD weapon.”

The two women smiled icicles at each other. “Not bad. Not bad at all,” said Telson grudgingly, studying the shapeless garments that he and Astra and Darv were wearing. Tidy and the garment-making android had worked for an hour to turn out the clothes and sandals in accordance with Telson’s rough description.

“Don’t get carried away with the praise,” said Tidy tartly.

Telson buckled his PD weapon under the loose folds of his smock and motioned to Darv and Astra to do the same. “Right,” he said, moving to the freight bay’s ramp. “It’ll be light in thirty minutes so we’d better get moving.”

“I’d like to come with you,” said Bran.

“No,” said Telson firmly.

“Look, I don’t like being stuck here with that creepy android watching me all the time.”

Tidy looked indignant. “Creepy? Me?”

“Why can’t I come?”

“Simple,” said Telson. “I don’t trust you.”

“Elka’s the one you shouldn’t trust.”

Telson looked sharply at Bran. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“She’s dangerous.”

“She’s scatty.”

“Thanks, Telson,” said Astra caustically. “But she is my daughter.”

“She gets it’s from her mother. Come on, time we were moving. I think we’ll walk; it’ll save us having to worry about where to conceal the hovercar.”

* * * *

The sun had been up fifteen minutes and was gaining rapidly in strength by the time the trio reached the fields that surrounded the township. As they walked along the baked dirt road, they noticed the poor quality of the crops and the determined efforts that had been made by the farmers to conserve moisture: the soil between the rows of vegetables was heavily mulched with dried leaves from the scrawny trees that provided windbreaks around the fields.

The first buildings were neat little stone houses with white walls and smooth white roofs, high-pitched to catch the meagre dew. Some of the larger houses had dew traps in their front gardens in the form of upright sheets of glass standing in ceramic troughs. The houses were still and quiet.

“Cart ahead,” warned Telson.

The approaching cart was drawn by the same breed of animal that they had seen earlier working the waterwheel. A farmer was sitting in the driver’s seat. He gave the three visitors a cursory nod as he passed them by. They breathed again and exchanged smiles of encouragement: their first daylight encounter with a fellow human on his home planet, perhaps their home planet now, had passed off without a hitch.

It was a different story in the marketplace in the town’s central square. Darv noticed that some of the early morning shoppers gathering around the fruit and vegetable stalls were glancing covertly at their clothes.

“The trouble is that material’s too good,” Telson commented when Darv mentioned it. “Maybe we should’ve rolled them about in the dirt.”

It didn’t seem important and the three spent an enjoyable half hour mingling with the increasing numbers of shoppers, and listening to the ceaseless chatter in the one language they understood. Above the noise could be heard the sound of chanting.

The people were all thin, but not unhealthily so. Telson guessed that

the produce of the fields, the indifferent fruit and vegetables piled on the stalls, was just enough to sustain the populace and no more.

"I've been trying to work out the relative values of everything," he said. "It looks as if the highest prices are being charged by the water seller." He pointed to a trader who was selling carefully controlled measures of drinking water from a barrel mounted on a cart.

"It all seems so unreal," Astra whispered to Darv. "I simply can't believe that we're really on Earth. It just doesn't seem possible. It's all wrong. We spend virtually our entire lives searching for Earth and when we do, we discover that the lakes have gone and we end up in a flea-infested market that looks like something out of the historical videos."

Darv put his arm around her shoulders. "I'm as baffled as you are, my lovely. A million years ago these people had the technology to build the Challenger. Half a million years later had the ability to move their planet out of its orbit... And now look at them. It doesn't make sense."

Telson was interested in the temple-like building in the centre of the square. Each of the four sides of the building were approached by a broad flight of steps. "What do you make of it?" he asked Darv.

"I don't know. A church?"

"Could be. I think that's where the chanting is coming from."

"Let's make our way towards it," Darv suggested.

An odd thing happened: the marketplace was becoming much more busy and everyone had to push their way through the crowd to make any progress. Everyone, that is, except Telson, Darv and Astra. As they moved forward, so a path opened up for them through the throng. A farmer even reined his cart to one side so as not to impede them. At the same time few people paid much attention to them apart from the occasional stare at their clothes. A pretty young girl moved hurriedly out of their way and dropped some coins in her haste. They were made of iron and rang loudly on the polished flagstones. Darv recovered one of the coins, glanced at it, and held it out to the girl. He turned on a dazzling smile; a Darv special — usually reserved for occasions when he wanted to get around Astra. The girl blushed deeply, stammered out a hurried "thank you", and snatched back the coin before pushing her way into the safety and anonymity of the crowd.

"Peeron," said Darv cryptically.

"Who?"

"The bearded gentlemen on the coin. Do you suppose it would start a

riot if we were to ask these people to take us to their leader?"

They reached the foot of the steps surrounding the temple. The chanting was coming from the open doors of the building. A cart driver pulled too sharply to one side to avoid them and locked wheels with another cart moving in the opposite direction. The animal drawing the second cart reared up in panic, unseated the driver, and promptly bolted, dragging the empty cart up the flight of steps to where a party of children were filing through the temple doors. They scattered with screams of terror when they saw the animal and disintegrating cart hurtling towards them. A man made an ineffectual grab at the cart as it charged past but he was thrown aside. Some of the children tried to jam themselves through the doors at once. A group of those who had scattered screamed even louder when they realised that they couldn't run fast enough to escape the crazed creature that was bearing down on them. Astra was a fraction of a second faster than Darv and Telson in pulling her PD weapon from its concealed holster. She took aim and unleashed two blasts that struck the charging creature in the head. It gave a scream, reared up, and crashed to the steps, turning the remains of the cart onto its side. There was a spasm of kicking from its hooves and then it lay still. Women swooped on the frightened, crying children and comforted them.

A semi-circle of silent, staring shoppers and traders gathered around the three strangers.

"I had to do it!" cried Astra defensively. "Those children would've been killed."

The three drew close together and moved a little way up the steps, tense and ready for trouble which they sensed was coming. But the semi-circle of people made no attempt to follow the strangers. They seemed content just to stare at them.

"Now look," began Darv, going down one step to show that he wasn't frightened. Before he could continue the crowd fell back. Telson grabbed hold of his arm and yanked him back.

"What are you all staring at?" Astra demanded, raising her voice. "What's the matter with you all? Are we any different from you?"

"You're very different," said a voice behind them.

The three spun round and gaped at the erect, elderly man who was regarding them from the top of the steps.

"Who are you?" Telson demanded suspiciously.

"He's Peeron," said Darv. "The man on the coin."

"That is correct," said Peeron. He smiled warmly, gathered up his long, white robes, and came down the steps, his hands held out in the universal gesture of friendship. "You have me at a disadvantage," he said, shaking hands with the three in turn. "All I know about you is that you entered Peeronica this morning. Oh please don't look so surprised. Your presence was noticed immediately."

"Why?" asked Telson. "Our clothes?"

Peeron's blue eyes twinkled. "Because you are so obviously well-fed. Please come with me. My office is in the temple."

* * * *

Peeron was lost in thought for some seconds when Telson finished speaking. He invited his guests to help themselves to more of the hot, sweet tea which a steward had brought into his austere furnished office. "An incredible story," he said softly, regarding his three guests with an expression of awe. "Absolutely incredible... That this planet was brought from another solar system half a million years ago... I find it impossible to believe and yet it explains so much."

"Such as?" Telson prodded.

"We know that we are the descendants of a great civilization that had reached its peak half a million years ago. Our archaeologists have discovered and dated some fragmentary evidence that merely hints at its greatness and riches. We have found star charts that show strange constellations and they also reveal that this planet once had a moon. We thought that it had been destroyed by the First People, as they destroyed everything else."

"How do you mean, Peeron?" asked Astra.

"And what happened to the civilization?" Darv added.

"We don't fully know." Peeron's eyes went to the window where the tower could be seen rearing into the blue, cloudless sky. "Their legacy is the great monument whose purpose we don't understand, and a planet that has been stripped of its elements and riches. The deserts yield a little iron ore but that is all. Our own written history is four thousand years old but it is not a glorious history. There is no glory in four thousand years of eking out a living from an impoverished soil with a dwindling population and insufficient water for our crops. Before us there were the First People. They were destroyed by a great

war, a holocaust about which we know little.” Peeron fell silent and toyed absently with his beard.

“Have you ever entered the tower, Peeron?”

“There is a door set into its north-eastern face that has defied all attempts to open it.”

“What is the population of Earth?”

“The same as the population of Peeronica. Less than ten thousand. The chanting you can hear are my priests praying for rain. The drought has now lasted for three centuries. This is the last community on Earth because we have a small spring. I can remember when it was a torrent pouring out of the ground and able to sustain a great lake... Now it is a feeble trickle and becomes weaker each year. Perhaps it will last another ten years... Twenty years...” He spread his gnarled, ancient hands. “Who knows.”

“Listen, Peeron,” said Telson earnestly. “In our ship are control systems, vast machines and robots, that we can use to re-engineer this planet. The irony is that they were designed to recreate suitable planets in the likeness of Earth. But with these machines we can mine deep into the desert and recover trace elements to enrich your fields; we can melt the frozen lake in the south, and we can fill the skies with clouds that will bring down rain, as much rain as you need and for as long as you need. We can do all these things. We can turn back the clock and make Earth young again.”

Peeron nodded and looked at Telson with rheumy eyes. “Yes, there were times when even my faith weakened. But we knew that it was what we can expect from you.”

Telson looked puzzled. “I don’t understand.”

“We knew you were coming.”

“How?”

“Many years ago the people were woken by a strange noise — a deep humming note that filled the night. It was the voice of the monument — speaking to you, calling to you and telling you of our plight.”

“The attacks, Telson!” Darv exclaimed suddenly. “They were coming from the tower!”

The same thought had already just occurred to Telson.

“I mobilized the entire temple college so that the priests were praying continuously,” Peeron continued. “And then the monument spoke again. And yet again. It came to life several times and then fell silent so we knew that you heard its call and were coming... And now you

are here.”

“We’ve got to find out more about that monument,” said Darv emphatically.

“Just a minute,” said Telson, not taking his eyes off Peeron. “Why should you think that this monument of yours was speaking to us?”

Peeron looked faintly surprised. “But of course it was. You are the coming that we have been praying for. You are our salvation and our hope... You are the Gods.”

Part Ten Earthvoice

Elka entered the Challenger's main control room and regarded Sharna with undisguised hatred. The guardian angels had told Elka that it was essential that she overpower Sharna and gain command of the control room. What the angels had not told Elka was that they were desperately afraid of the damage they would sustain if there was another attack at such close range.

"What do you want, Elka?" demanded Sharna.

Elka gave Sharna one of her inane grins. "Have you heard any more?"

"That's near enough. Yes, I've now had two reports." Sharna briefly outlined the latest developments on Earth ending with: "So there you have it - the three of them are being treated as gods."

Elka giggled. "Oh that really is weirdness."

"You can stop all that."

"Stop all what?"

Sharna's tone became abrasive. "That ridiculous act you put on: that 'Oh gosh, people' and 'weirdness' and 'aren't I a frothy little girl?' act."

Elka gave a humourless laugh. "You don't know what my act is, Sharna."

Sharna touched the switch that isolated the guardian angels. "Oh yes I do, Elka. The guardian angels want to rule the Earth through you and Bran, just as they once hoped to rule it through us. Well that's funny, really funny because what's left of the glorious human race which once had the ability to move planets from their orbits is now a handful of thirsty people scratching out a bleak, primitive existence on a barren planet."

"Only if Telson's reports are true."

"They're true," Sharna replied.

"We shall know soon enough," said Elka. "Bran will find out."

"Bran is under an armed guard in the shuttle."

"By Tidy," Elka murmured. "You think that android will stop him? Believe me, Sharna, your son is more scared of me than he is of any

android.”

Sharna stared at Elka in loathing. “So I was right about you.”

“You half-guessed, Sharna. I can bend him to my will. But you don’t know how I do it, do you? It’s a talent I’ve had ever since I was a baby on Paradise. A talent that the angels helped me to develop as I’ve grown older.”

Sharna looked cynical. “What talent?”

“Watch my eyes, Sharna.”

Sharna looked into Elka’s luminous eyes and then looked away.

“No, don’t look away... There... Now you can’t look away, can you?”

“I can.”

“Try!”

Sharna’s eyes remained fixed on Elka.

Elka gave a smile of triumph. “You want to tear your eyes away but you can’t. You want to do exactly as I say, don’t you?”

“Yes,” said Sharna woodenly.

“You want to please me by giving me nice presents.”

“Oh, yes.”

“Very well, Sharna. Keep looking into my eyes... That’s right... You’re going to give me little present right now. You’re going to give me your PD weapon. That would make a very nice present.”

Sharna’s hand went to her holster. Elka experienced a surge of elation. The angels had assured her that the power would work with anyone but it had been difficult to accept their assurances with Bran as her only victim. Sharna withdrew the PD weapon from its holster.

“Now give it to me.”

Sharna held out the weapon. Elka seized it eagerly.

“Now I want you to call up Tidy in the shuttle and tell him to hand over his PD weapon to Bran.”

Sharna’s face cleared. She seemed to be puzzled by the sight of the PD weapon in Elka’s hand. Elka repeated her request.

“And what if I refuse?”

Elka pointed the weapon at Sharna’s face. “You know better than I do what these things can do.”

“You’d better release the safety catch.”

Sharna smiled. "That's right, Elka - that little lever."

A slight tremble spoiled Elka's aim but not enough to cause her to miss Sharna if she fired. "You're to tell Tidy to hand over his PD weapon to Bran!"

"Come on," said Sharna in a gently mocking tone. "What are you waiting for? You can't miss at that range. You'd be certain to kill me."

Elka became frightened. "I mean it, Sharna. I won't hesitate!"

"But you are hesitating." Sharna took a step towards Elka. "What are you waiting for? Just a little squeeze with your fingers, that's all it takes."

Sharna took two more steps forward and slapped Elka hard across the face. The younger girl screamed and dropped the PD weapon. Sharna picked it up and pushed a capsule into its breech.

"That's better. One thing the angels should've taught you, Elka, and that's not to make threats you haven't the guts to carry out. Not that you could've carried them out with an unloaded PD weapon. Your little tricks may work with my son but I'm much too used to the guardian angels for them to work with me."

Elka eyes almost spat their hatred at Sharna. "Next time I will kill you, Sharna."

"So what did the angels promise you?"

"Ask them!" snapped Elka.

Sharna's PD weapon sent a bolt of energy smashing into the floor near Elka's foot. The girl gave a cry of fear and backed away.

"Next time I won't miss," Sharna threatened. "So what did they promise you?"

Elka saw Sharna's finger tightening. She blurted out: "Everything... That I would have total power, not just over Bran but over an entire planet."

"And you believed them?"

"Of course."

Sharna nodded and lowered the weapon. "Well, I can't blame you. It's not your fault. There was a time when we worshipped them. But I'll tell you something, Elka: if the angels find a way of realising their ambitions without you, they won't hesitate to destroy you."

Elka looked contemptuous. "You expect me to believe that?"

"I don't care what you believe. You're to return to your quarters and

stay there until I call you.”

* * * *

Astra finished her calculations and looked up from the temple ledger that one of Peeron’s priest had brought into the office. “They’re only rough figures,” she said, “but the times that these records say that the monument spoke coincide with the times of the attacks.”

“We’d like to look at the monument please, Peeron,” Telson requested.

The old man beamed at his guests. “But of course. I will come with you.”

* * * *

In daylight the hingeless door in the base of monument appeared to be even more formidable than it had the previous night. It looked solid and unyielding and was such a tight fit that Darv was convinced that the surround and the door itself were one piece of material.

“It’s the only door in the monument,” said Peeron. “For centuries our greatest brains have wrestled with the problem of how it opens. There are no visible hinges and no way that it could slide.”

Thankful to be out of the sun, Telson joined Peeron under the huge canopy that was being held aloft by ten priests. Astra and Bran were standing beside the old man.

“Do you have any factual evidence as to what the monument contains?” inquired Telson.

Peeron shook his head. “All we have are the legends that it contains all the knowledge of the First People. There are some old writings in the museum that speak of its lock being childishly simple but that we will not be able to open the door until we are ready for the monument’s knowledge.” Peeron stared for a moment at the mighty edifice. “This may seem hard to believe, Telson, but the writings also say that the door is so well balanced that, when unlocked, a two year old child would be able to open it with one push of its little finger.”

“That is impossible to believe,” Darv called over his shoulder as he

scraped sand away from the base of the door and exposed the bottom of the surround.

“Come on, Tidy. Dig.”

“I’ll get sand in my joints,” the android protested.

“Dig!”

Grumbling to himself, Tidy began scratching half-heartedly at the sand.

“Our archaeologists once dug down ten feet,” Peeron observed.

“We’ll dig down twenty feet,” said Telson determinedly.

“You dig down twenty feet,” Tidy retorted.

Peeron smiled. “Your servant doesn’t treat you like gods, Telson.”

“That’s because we’re not gods.”

Peeron nodded to the space shuttle parked a little way off. “That machine makes it hard for me to believe you, Telson.”

“This a waste of time, Telson,” said Darv, sitting back and looking dejectedly at the stonework he and Tidy had exposed. “These foundations could go down hundreds of feet. How about calling up Sharna and getting her to bring down a couple of the heavy excavator androids and a load of gear in a shuttle?”

“And some X-ray equipment,” Astra suggested.

“Would you object to us trying to open the door, Peeron?”

The old man thought for a moment. “How can I possibly object to the wishes of gods? But you promised that there would be rain to end the drought.”

“And so there will be, Peeron. But on one condition: that you accept us as ordinary human beings and not gods.”

Peeron smiled. “Very well, Telson. But if you do provide rain, you will make it very hard for me to accept such a condition.”

“I’ll call up Sharna from the shuttle,” said Telson as he moved off. “She’ll be out of range of the radio collars at the moment. Bran — you’d better come with me.”

“There’s something I want to say,” said Bran awkwardly before Telson opened the channels to speak to Sharna. “I want to apologise for the way that I’ve treated you and the others.”

Bran hesitated, fiddling with his one-piece garment while he marshalled his thoughts and words. The embarrassed silence ended and Bran’s words tumbled out in a rush:

“I don’t want to be the commander of the Challenger. I never have done. I don’t want to rule anyone or conquer anyone or do anything like that. It’s Elka who has always wanted these things. As long as I can remember, its always been Elka whose has made me do things that I didn’t want to. She always wanted me to be in trouble with you so that no one would suspect her. I don’t want what she wants. I don’t want anything except to try and repair all the harm I’ve caused.” Bran sat down in one of the seats and stared at the flight deck floor.

“So Sharna was right,” said Telson after a pause.

Bran looked up with hope in his eyes. “What about?”

“A long time ago she once told me that she thought it might be a good idea if you and Elka were separated.”

“So you’ve always known about Elka? I’m sorry for what’s happened... Please believe me, I’m so very sorry...”

Telson smiled and gave his son’s shoulder an affectionate punch. “It’s not your fault, Bran, but we’ll shake hands on it, eh?”

* * * *

“I know nothing about rain propagation,” said Elka sulkily as Sharna sat her at a control desk in the Challenger’s terra-forming centre.

“All you have to do is enter the figures as I give them to you.”

“You can do it yourself.”

“Angel Two!”

“Sharna?”

“Presumably you want Earth to survive because there’s nothing to be gained out of dominating a dead planet. Correct?”

“A logical premise, Sharna,” Angel Two replied. “But we can instruct androids to do all that is necessary.”

“After the flood you engineered on Paradise, I don’t doubt it,” said Sharna evenly. “But I prefer to see that it is done so tell Elka to do as I tell her.”

“Elka,” said Angel Two. “I have conferred with Angel One. We are of the opinion that it would be best if you co-operated with Sharna for the time-being.”

* * * *

A giant pod, larger than the largest shuttle, separated from the Challenger. It orbited the Earth alongside the starship for a few minutes until its thrusters fired at the right moment to cancel its orbital velocity. Sharna watched the silvery pod falling towards Earth on a screen in the terra-forming centre. Once it was out of sight, the instruments on her control desk continued to monitor its progress.

The pod’s heatshield glowed cherry red during its entry into the atmosphere. At 100,000 feet the thrusters took over again and guided the pod towards the huge frozen lake in the southern hemisphere. The onboard computers sensed the increasing atmospheric pressure and probed the ground with radar. At the right moment the computers detonated the explosive bolts so that the pod split into four sections that peeled away. The pod’s now free falling payload consisted of four latticework tower-like structures. At 10,000 feet above the lake, drogue parachutes on each of the descending towers jerked the main parachutes from their packs. Huge clusters of fabric mushroomed in the clear skies.

Some precision final guidance was applied to the parachute lines so that the four hanging towers were correctly positioned for the final drop. At 100 feet the parachutes released their loads. The steel structures, each equipped with its own fusion reactor, smashed through the ice and sank to the bottom of the lake.

The onboard computers responded to the icy water by activating the reactors. Six hours later the ice covering the lake began to melt and a mist formed above the surface.

* * * *

The angels learned of the plan to gain entry to the monument from Telson's radio report to Sharna. Although they were apprehensive of the great tower's ability to damage them, they were intrigued by the legend that it contained all the accumulated knowledge of the First People. Knowledge was power. The tower was built by humans therefore human curiosity would be able to penetrate its secrets. Especially Darv's curiosity.

* * * *

Shortly before Sharna was due to arrive from the Challenger, a sudden commotion in the square brought Telson and the others to the upper floor window of the house that Peeron had loaned his visitors. There were about 500 people present. They were all talking excitedly and pointing up at the gathering wisps of grey cumulus that were moving from the south. At midnight there was an event that, according to an excited Peeron, had not taken place on Earth for 300 years.

The sun became obscured by cloud.

At 1 o'clock it started raining. The people became silent as the first drops fell. Some were looking up, blinking in stunned surprise as the heavy drops fell like small electric shocks on their upturned faces. Others held out their hands in disbelief. Suddenly the square began to fill with people: mothers with babies clutched in their arms; the old, the sick and the infirm. All were congregating in order to share their experience of the miracle. And yet there were no displays of emotion, no cries. Even the children were strangely silent.

The rain stopped and the town held its breath. Fifteen minutes passed. The crowd was a motionless sea of faces turned to the sombre, overcast heavens. Peeron and a column of white robed priests filed silently out of the temple and stood in a line gazing up at the sky.

Lightning flickered briefly, illuminating the clouds from within. There was a low rumble of thunder and then the deluge began. A great sigh went up from the crowd. A small group below the window where Telson and the others were standing began singing and dancing. Others joined in. Within seconds the crowd had erupted into a whirl of frenzied, near hysterical singing and dancing.

Peeron made his way unassisted through the wildly celebrating multitude and stood below the window looking up. His lips moved but his words were drowned by the uproar. Nor was it possible to tell if

the rivulets streaming down his cheeks were tears or raindrops.

* * * *

Elka was sulky and withdrawn upon her arrival with Sharna and refused to help with the unloading of any of the supplies. Despite the two hour downpour earlier in the day, the sand around the base of the tower was dry and hot.

Peeron arrived with his retinue and was introduced to Sharna.

"The rain this morning was intended to only last a short while," she assured the old man. "The idea is to provide just enough rain to first close up the cracks in the riverbeds and to soak the fields. Too much rain right away will wash away your topsoil."

Peeron looked up at the scudding clouds. "And when will it rain again, Sharna?"

"Tonight," Sharna promised. "And then there'll be a medium fall of rain every night for the next thirty days to build up the soil's water table."

Telson approached, shook hands with Peeron, and said: "We've found some faint scratch marks on the door. We are wondering if you know what caused them?"

Peeron thought for a moment. "Ah yes. That was the last ruler. He had a battering ram built that took three hundred men to lift. They pounded the door for a week before giving up."

"Which is the one thing we won't do," Telson promised.

Peeron turned to one of his stewards and gave orders that all the ancient writings about the tower were to be brought from the museum immediately. He silenced Telson's protests with an upraised hand and pointed out that the writings might contain a clue that had eluded the temple scholars. He watched the activity around the monument's door with interest. "What are you going to do first?"

Telson glanced across to where Astra and Darv were busy checking some X-ray equipment power cables that snaked across the sand from the shuttle to the great door. Bran was willingly assisting although Elka was watching the proceedings with indifference.

"We're going to take some pictures of the inside of the door," he explained.

* * * *

Darv held an X-ray scanning head in place against the join between the door and its surround. "Okay," he called out. "Ready."

At the precise moment that Astra touched the X-ray power supply switch, an attack started.

* * * *

The guardian angels' despair lasted a few milliseconds before they discovered that the attack was not like the other transmissions. In fact it was not an attack at all but a servile intelligence reaching out from the tower to them.

The intelligence was apologetic about the earlier attacks. It said that it had not realised that the guardian angels were such superior entities. If the humans opened the door, the intelligence promised the guardian angels that all the thousands of years of accumulated knowledge locked in the tower would become the angels' property. The gesture would be the intelligence's gift of retribution to the angels for the unwitting attacks it had launched against them.

They questioned the intelligence about the knowledge and learned from it that the tower contained the plans of armed starships that were half a million years ahead of the Challenger's design. The angels reasoned that by controlling such knowledge, they could advance the Earth's technology so that the people of Earth would be building such starships for them within 100 years. After another 50 years, the angels estimated that they would have a vast fleet under their command which they could use to conquer the entire Universe.

* * * *

Sharna looked up from the X-ray hologram viewer and sighed. "My readings are the same as yours," she said to the others. "The door's two feet thick and it's set into a surround of the same thickness. But

there's definitely no lock on it. There are no mortises, no tongues, no locking plates, no moving bars. In fact there's nothing holding it closed whatsoever."

"And the shadows at the top?" queried Telson.

"Two massive but simple top-hanging hinges on the inside so that the door opens inwards and upwards. The spheres on the end of the levers must be counterbalances so that the door can open by itself."

"No locks..." said Darv thoughtfully.

"It's a beautifully simple design," Sharna continued. "I can well believe the old writings: despite its weight, a push from a child's little finger ought to be enough for it to swing open."

Darv spread out the ancient manuscript that Peeron had provided and, for the fifth time, read aloud the short but enigmatic passage that they all found the most interesting:

"It is said that there is no real lock on the door — only a lock of ignorance that will cease to exist when Humankind is sufficiently advanced to have mastered simple control of the elements." He picked up one of the X-ray prints that had been made from one of the holograms. It was the print that showed a high-density object to be imbedded in the exact centre of the door. "Has anyone had a guess at what the shadow in the middle is?"

No one answered him. The mysterious door defied all attempts at rational explanation.

* * * *

The night was oppressively hot. Astra woke up and discovered that Darv's bed beside her in the shuttle's passenger cabin was empty.

She ventured out clad in a thin nightdress and found Darv gazing at the door.

"Darv?"

He gave a start and then smiled. "Sorry, Astra. I couldn't sleep for thinking about this damned door. It's so maddening, the feeling that the thing is mocking us... A door without a lock that we can't open."

Astra leaned against the door. There was a sensual pleasantness about its warmth that she felt against her skin through her flimsy nightdress.

They talked in low tones for a few minutes, mostly about Elka and the remarkable change in their daughter's personality from an extrovert to a sulky introvert. They both found it hard to accept Sharna's account of the influence that Elka had wielded over Bran and yet they both realised that it had to be true.

"Darv," said Astra suddenly. "Why is the door warmer in the middle?"

"You were mistaken"

Astra pulled off her nightdress, turned to face the door and pressed her naked body against it, arms and legs outstretched. "No," she said. "It's definitely a bit warmer in the middle than it is at the sides."

Darv frowned, deep in thought, as Astra put her nightdress back on. He spread his palm out on the door, first in the centre and then at the sides, but his hands did not possess the sensitivity of Astra's body to enable him to register any variations in the door's temperature.

"One thing we didn't do," Astra observed. "And that was to examine the door in the infrared."

Darv snapped his fingers with the realization that Astra had a point and asked her to fetch an infrared viewer and a radiation meter. She was back two minutes later with both the required items.

Examining the door in the infrared spectrum showed a burning crimson hotspot in the centre of the door, and the display reading on the radiation meter shot up to nearly maximum when Darv slid the probe into the same place.

"Brilliant," said Darv softly. "Absolutely brilliant... An isotope imbedded in the door to keep it warm. For a million years if necessary. What would I have given to have met these people... So beautifully simple..."

"Can we open it?"

Darv laughed and put an arm around Astra. "Nothing could be simpler. The lock is ignorance... Tomorrow we'll unlock it with knowledge."

* * * *

Peeron arrived when the mass of freezer plates attached to the door had been operating for an hour and had reduced its temperature by three degrees.

“At least we’re now gaining on the isotope,” Sharna commented.

Peeron looked bemused and waved a hand at the frost-covered plates on the door that were connected to a humming freezer plant. “What does it all mean, Telson?”

“It means that we’re removing heat from the door faster than the isotope can replace it with the result that the door’s getting colder.”

“But how will that release the lock?”

“All materials expand as their temperature is raised,” Telson explained. “If that door is a perfect fit in its surround at normal temperature, then if it’s warmed, even slightly, it becomes such a tight fit that it will never budge. Not even if you dropped a mountain on it.”

“If Darv’s right,” said Sharna, “you could open the door by piling ice against it. It sounds simple enough but can your people make ice?”

“No,” Peeron answered.

Sharna nodded. “The ability to make ice is a fundamental first step towards an advanced technology. A primitive society can make fire, but to make cold—”

“Telson!” Astra called out. “Come and see this!”

Everyone gathered around Astra and watched her slid a fine feeler gauge between the surround and the door.

Telson took the shim from her and eased it into the crack without difficulty. “Well we couldn’t do that an hour ago,” he commented. “Let’s try a thicker gauge.”

The next thickness shim in the feeler gauge set refused to enter the gap. Telson knelt down and, with one hand resting on the door, tried to insert the gauge along the bottom of the door. Without warning and without making a sound, the door swung smoothly inwards and upwards. Telson fell sprawling, half into the opening. He scrambled to his feet and joined the others who had all taken an involuntary step back. They were staring speechless at the huge opening that had miraculously appeared in the base of the monument. Lights came on inside the tower, illuminating rows of machines that resembled hologram replicators. The floor had the texture and sheen of highly-polished marble.

“Tidy!” snapped Telson.

“What?”

“Go in there and stand in the middle of floor.”

The android wasn't keen on the idea. "Supposing there's something in there that takes a dislike to me?"

"That's what I aim to find out. Now do as you're told."

Muttering to himself, Tidy trundled through the doorway and stopped near the machines.

Everyone anxiously watched Tidy with exception of Elka who remained sulkily indifferent to what was happening.

"What can you see?" Telson called out.

"Just hologram replicators," Tidy replied. "And some bright lights. It's all nice and tidy."

"Okay. You can come back and stand in the doorway."

The android returned and stopped in the entrance. Telson withdrew his PD weapon, nodded to the others to do the same, and told Darv to give his spare firearm to Bran. He turned to Peeron and said: "I think it would be best if you and your retinue withdrew to a safe distance, Peeron. Just in case we have to shoot our way out."

Peeron smiled knowingly and signalled to his priests to move back.

"Elka," Telson called out. "You're to come with us."

"I'm unarmed," the girl replied.

"You're to stay with us," said Telson firmly. "Tidy, if that door tries to close, you're to jam it open with your body and yell out."

"It might crush me!" Tidy protested.

"If it does, we promise to clear up the mess. Now do as you're told!"

"Thanks," said the android bitterly, moving into position. "It's nice to know that I'm of some use."

Telson led the five through the doorway and into the monument. Their feet echoed on the gleaming marble floor as they moved to the nearest hologram replicator and stopped. They looked around curiously. There was little to see but the endless rows of machines and it was impossible to see beyond the fierce overhead lights. They formed a defensive circle, on guard for the slightest hostile movement.

"It's a library," whispered Darv, awed by his surroundings. "A vast library."

A warm, reassuring voice spoke to them. It seemed so close that they all spun round, each convinced that the voice was right behind them.

"My name is Earthvoice. Welcome and congratulations on opening the door."

Telson quickly recovered his composure when he realised that there was no immediate danger. He stared around, searching for the source of the voice and said, keeping his voice steady: "Thank you, Earthvoice. My name is Telson. We are the crew of the starship Challenger which is in Earth orbit at the moment."

There was a slight pause before the voice replied. "Yes. I was warned of the Challenger's existence many years ago."

"Warned?" queried Darv.

"You have not allowed the people of Earth in here," the voice continued. "That was very wise. They did not open the door therefore they are not ready for the information in this library."

"Is that all you are, Earthvoice?" asked Darv. "A library?"

"No. I am also a guardian. My duty is to watch over the people of Earth during their vulnerable period of redevelopment following the great holocaust."

"What was the great holocaust?"

"A war which took place four thousand years ago. When it was realised that the war would eventually destroy Earth's civilization, this monument was built as a repository of all knowledge so that it would not be lost. The lock was designed so that they would not be able to open the door until they had started on the road to technological recovery of their own volition."

"You did nothing about the drought," Telson accused.

"Weather control is not among my functions," the Earthvoice replied. "But I am grateful for your intervention."

"You've got the guardian angels to thank for that, Earthvoice," said Elka suddenly. "Without their guidance, it would not have been possible to have ended the drought."

"Yes," murmured the Earthvoice. "I am aware of my great debt to your guardian angels. I have already established a vague contact with them."

"I'll do the talking, Elka," said Telson, catching Darv's warning look and nodding to him.

"Why do you wish to silence her?" asked the Earthvoice. "I would like to know more about your guardian angels. They may be able to assist me look after the interests of Earth."

"They're evil!" Astra shouted suddenly. "They have to be destroyed!"

"Don't listen to them, Earthvoice!" Elka pleaded. "Only Angel One and

Angel Two can help you. These people have tried to destroy them and they have failed!”

Telson grabbed hold of Elka’s arm and started pulling her towards the doorway. Darv caught hold of her other arm. She fought like a cat. “You see, Earthvoice!” she screamed. “They want to silence me!”

“Stop! You must leave her alone!”

The commanding note in the voice was sufficient for Telson and Darv to release their grip on Elka.

“I want Elka to tell me about the angels without interruption,” stated the Earthvoice. “Tell me, Elka, can the guardian angels help me guard the people of Earth?”

“Of course,” said Elka defiantly. “They have great knowledge and power. Weather control is only a fraction of what they can do. With their help you can make the Earth great again.”

Telson was tempted to drag Elka out of the monument but he forced himself to remain silent.

“This is very interesting, Elka,” observed the Earthvoice. “I will attempt a proper communication with them this time. I will relay what is said between us so that you can all hear it, but the angels will not be able to hear you.”

The six heard a strange pulsating noise. It was similar to the music of the attacks but very much weaker and not as insidious.

“Angel One and Angel Two,” said the Earthvoice.

“Greetings, Earthvoice,” said Angel One’s voice. “Are you receiving us clearly?”

“Yes, Angel One,” said the Earthvoice. “I now accept that you have the power to help me rule the Earth. I can over-ride my builders’ programs and assure you that there will be no more attacks on you.”

“Then we have an agreement, Earthvoice? We will share our power if you will share your knowledge.”

“Agreed,” said the Earthvoice.

“We can’t allow this collusion,” said Sharna vehemently.

“What about the six members of your crew, Angel One?” asked the Earthvoice.

“They are a danger to our plans,” Angel One replied. “They are greedy and ambitious. It will be necessary to destroy them.”

Elka gave a gasp of dismay.

“Including the one called Elka?” asked the Earthvoice.

“Especially the one called Elka,” said Angel One. “She is of no consequence.”

“No, Angel One!” screamed Elka. “This is Elka! Your Elka!” Realising that Angel One couldn’t hear her, she sank to the floor and wept. Astra knelt at her side and tried to comfort her daughter.

“I shall be proud to share my knowledge with you,” continued the Earthvoice. “I will effect the transfer of my records as soon as your facilities are standing by.”

“My God,” breathed Telson. “What have we done?”

“We are ready to receive you, Earthvoice,” said Angel One.

A low, throbbing beat filled the library.

“This is amazing, Earthvoice!” said Angel Two. “So much knowledge! So much that we did not know!”

The beat became louder. Even Elka forgot the angels’ treachery and looked around in surprise while clinging fearfully to Astra. The six put their hands over their ears.

“Something is wrong, Earthvoice!” cried Angel One. “I’m losing everything!”

“Reverse the process!” said Angel Two urgently. “Earthvoice — you must stop! You are destroying us!”

The throbbing beat merged into a shriek that dragged on for several seconds while the voices of the angels become progressively weaker. After two minutes they were no longer to be heard. The deafening noise stopped.

Telson cautiously took his hands away from his ears and looked up at the steadily burning lights. “We don’t understand, Earthvoice. What happened?”

“Angel One and Two no longer exist,” said the Earthvoice simply. “I have erased their consciousness and wiped out all their memory facilities. All that exists now are a few automatic subsystems to permit control of the Challenger’

“They wanted to kill me,” said Elka in a low voice.

“You were no longer of use to them, Elka. It is the same with all freewill computers.”

“It’s unbelievable,” said Telson, badly shaken. “They’ve dominated us virtually all our lives and you managed to destroy them in a few seconds.”

“No, Telson. It has taken me many years, ever since I first received warning of their existence. You once visited the Sentinel at First Footprint City on the moon in the Earth’s original solar system?”

Telson nodded. “Many years ago, Earthvoice.”

“I received a broadcast from the Sentinel following your visit to the moon warning me that two early freewill computers were searching for Earth. It was then that I started transmitting random attacks. I ceased the attacks when I learned from a Spaceguard station that they were not working. I decided that the only thing to do was to allow the angels to come to me so that I could destroy them by direct means. I’m sorry that it was necessary for me to mislead you, but I wanted to discover your attitude to the guardian angels and to Earth before I decided your fate. In Elka’s case I decided that all I had to do was show her the angels in their true colours.”

“I’m sorry everyone,” said Elka miserably. “I don’t know what to say... I’m sorry...”

“So what’s the next move?” asked Telson.

“The new weather pattern you have created,” said the Earthvoice. “Is it stable?”

“Yes,” said Sharna.

“That is very good news. I am most grateful to you for ending the drought. But there is one other matter...”

“Yes?” prompted Telson.

“You have spent your lives searching for Earth and now that you have found it... It does not seem fair—”

“I know what you’re going to say,” Telson interrupted. “It doesn’t matter. We found a planet which we called Paradise...”

“If you wish to stay, I will not stop you. But my instructions are that the people of Earth should be allowed to develop in their own time.”

Telson smiled. “We learned to love Paradise, Earthvoice. We will seal the monument and say our goodbyes to Peeron and the others before returning to the Challenger.” He looked questioning at his companions. They all nodded in turn.

“If you ever wish to return to Earth—”

“Thank you, Earthvoice,” Telson replied, shaking his head. “But Paradise is our Earth now.”

There was a brief silence before the Earthvoice answered: “Thank you, all of you. I wish you a safe journey home.”

“All control room consoles active,” said Sharna, reciting the first response in the complex pre-thrust procedure.

Telson touched the controls on the commander’s desk and smiled across at Bran and Elka who were watching the procedure with interest. “I’m sorry there’s not much for you to do at the moment. But by the time we reach Paradise I daresay you’ll be able to handle the ship blindfolded.”

Elka laughed. “We really don’t mind.”

“Standing by,” called Darv.

“Standing by,” said Astra.

“Control Subsystem One standing by,” announced Angel One’s voice from a terminal.

“Control Subsystem Two standing by,” stated Angel Two’s voice.

There was a stunned silence in the Challenger’s main control room at the sound of the two hated voices. Telson’s eyes seemed to bulge from their sockets and Astra clutched the edge of her console, convinced that she was going to faint.

Darv look of astonishment suddenly gave way to laughter.

“So what’s so damned funny?” snarled Telson. “They’re supposed to have been destroyed!”

“They have been,” said Darv, still chuckling. “But the Earthvoice said that a few automatic subsystems were left—which are certain to include the angels’ original speech synthesizers.”

Telson looked unconvinced so Darv called out: “Control System One.”

“Awaiting your command,” answered Angel One’s voice.

“That’s what you are now, aren’t you, System One? Brainless subsystems. Correct?”

“Perfectly correct... Darv,” answered Angel One’s voice.

“Quite brainless,” stated Angel Two’s voice

Yeah.

THE END